

BUNGO STRAY DOGS

DEAD APPLE

5

Original Story by BUNGO STRAYDOGS DA PARTNERS

Written by HIRO IWAHATA

Illustration by GANJII

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ORIGINAL STORY BY
Bungo StrayDogs DA Partners

WRITTEN BY
Hiro Iwahata

ILLUSTRATION BY
Ganji



Copyright

Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 5
HIRO IWAHATA

Translation by Matt Rutsohn
Original Story by Bungo StrayDogs DA Partners
Written by Hiro Iwahata
Illustration by Ganjii

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter I

Interlude 1

Chapter II

Interlude 2—1

Chapter III

Interlude 2—2

Interlude 2—3

Chapter IV

Interlude—3

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Defeated
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

The
Matchless
Poet

Super
Deduction

Demon
Snow

Kashomon

PROLOGUE

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

All
Men
Are
Equal

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

PROLOGUE

Never in the history of Yokohama's underground society did so many corpses pile up as they did during that eighty-eight-day bloodbath known as the Dragon's Head Conflict. A great number of organizations were involved in the slaughter.

The night before its conclusion...

A crimson full moon reigned over the night sky. Withered leaves danced in the wind as they descended upon the ground. A heavy air filled the streets as a low-level Port Mafia grunt, Sakunosuke Oda, jogged toward his destination. Gunfire echoed from the back alleys. Even Odasaku had his gun drawn, surveying every single crevice so as to not be caught off guard. After turning the corner, he found himself before an old, filthy brick building. It smelled like blood.

I'm sick of this, Odasaku thought with a brief sigh. In every direction he looked, there was death—piles of bodies littered the streets. Each corpse had a gun in hand with shell casings scattered about. It appeared some opposing criminal factions had gotten into a shoot-out.

“...?”

Out of nowhere, Odasaku thought he heard something. It was a sound unfit for such a somber night. But there was no time to hesitate. Odasaku sprinted down the street in the direction of the voice, even though it led in the opposite direction of his destination. He arrived to find a car flipped on its side. There were people lying on the ground nearby who'd apparently gotten launched out of the car's window.

Upon approaching them, Odasaku holstered his gun and checked the bodies. They were most likely a married couple. The husband was lying on top as if to protect his family. He was unarmed, and his attire made it apparent that he was just an ordinary person who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The husband and wife had already taken their last breath, perhaps after being hit by a stray bullet. However, it appeared that they had managed to shield their child from any gunfire. The small, young girl was crying—the sound that had drawn Odasaku over. He scooped her up in his arms and checked if she was hurt, but she miraculously only had a few minor injuries. On a handkerchief peeking out from under her shirt's hem was the name *Sakura*, clearly written by a child.

“You're lucky to be alive,” he said to her.

Suddenly, loud static echoed from Odasaku's earphones, followed by the voice of a very close friend.

“*Odasaku.*”

Odasaku sharpened his gaze the instant he got the call.

“Dazai, where are you?” Odasaku asked in a low voice.

“I have a good idea of what you're doing, but you need to run. Now. All hell is about to break loose—,” came Dazai's hasty reply, followed by more static when someone else connected to the call: *“Outta the way, grunt!”*

Odasaku looked up at the sound of the new voice, and immediately a motorcycle shot right past him.

Riding the motorcycle was a man wearing a distinctive black hat—the same person who cut in on Odasaku and Dazai's call a second ago. He was a Port Mafia executive known as Chuuya Nakahara. Despite his small, modest build, he wildly twisted the throttle to drive even faster. A gentle, insouciant voice could be heard coming from Chuuya's headset. It was Dazai's.

"Hey, Chuuya. You're in the enemy's line of fire now, so eat a bullet and die, okay?"

"Shut your mouth!" Chuuya furiously yelled back. But when he glanced up, he noticed a grenade heading right for him just like Dazai had warned. It was from an RPG-7—a high explosive anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher powerful enough to blast through thick armor. It wasn't something you'd use against a single human.

The grenade was heading straight for Chuuya, but he skillfully used his body weight to steer the motorcycle and dodge the projectile. Nevertheless, he had to tilt his vehicle almost parallel to the ground, creating sparks as his pedal scraped against the gravel. The grenade nicked his left shoulder as it went by and blew up the street behind him.

The enemy fired a second shot, this time aimed slightly ahead of Chuuya as if they knew he would evade the first one. The road right in front of Chuuya was engulfed in an explosion, but he was able to dodge just in time once again. Then there came a third grenade, bringing with it a subsequent blast and shock wave.

The road was riddled with craters and white smoke as gravel scattered through the air. No ordinary human would be able to escape these attacks. However, Chuuya emerged from the dense smoke on his motorcycle, furiously speeding ahead. The final grenade should have hit him, since there was no room for him to dodge its explosion like he did for the first two shots. So how did he do it? Timing. He promptly calculated the course of the projectile and slowed down his motorcycle so he wouldn't take a direct hit. While he got hit by the shock wave, Chuuya could use his engine's and motorcycle's weight to minimize its impact. His powers of observation, kinetic vision, and computing capabilities helped him instantly predict the speed and trajectory of the grenade, and his dexterity like a race-car driver allowed him to handle his motorcycle with such precision.

Chuuya let his bike's wheels slide across the pavement as the black smoke tickled his nose. The enemy immediately came at him with a new method of attack as if he figured shooting him wouldn't work. A masked man stood atop the building next to the prefectural office, looking down at Chuuya. The man raised a hand into the air, and instantly a bolt of lightning lit up the night sky. He then swung his arm, aiming a bolt of lightning right at Chuuya.

“Tch. Damn skill user!”

The lightning tore through the ground as it chased after Chuuya, who bitterly clicked his tongue. He tried to turn by tilting his motorcycle to the right, only to be surrounded by a different bolt. Between the power, the range, and the simultaneous attacks, the masked man’s skill was unbelievably strong.

Lightning flashed over the street, and the ground started to cave in. Dust rose into the air, swallowing Chuuya. It looked like a direct hit, but at the very next moment, he reemerged from the smoke, riding perpendicular *up* the wall of the office building. The air-cooled engine roared; the rubber tires burned as they scraped against the wall. But the motorcycle, which should have fallen due to gravity, was still showing no signs of slowing down. The masked skill user aimed another bolt of lightning at Chuuya, who sped up and easily dodged. After arriving at the rooftop, Chuuya shot a piercing glare at the masked man on the neighboring building.

“Ya got cocky,” scoffed Chuuya before revving his engine even more. He was headed straight for the masked man.

Slipping between the back-to-back lightning attacks, Chuuya cleared the connecting passageway, then began climbing the wall of a neighboring building without losing any speed. The motorcycle soared over the surface, tires roaring as they spun in the air before landing on the rooftop—the same rooftop the masked man was standing on. Chuuya skidded the tires across the rooftop’s tiles to break the bike’s momentum, and the back tire let out an earsplitting screech as it scraped against the tiles. The masked skill user continued to strike as the motorcycle spun until he hit the engine with a bolt of lightning, causing an explosion.



“...”

The sound of the violent blast even reached Dazai, who was nearby—in fact, he had been on the same rooftop as the masked man the entire time. He watched as the motorcycle burst into flames.

After being captured by the enemy, Dazai had been handcuffed and brought to this very location. His arms were wrapped in bandages, and he had a few faint bruises around his bloody mouth where he had been punched. His right eye was wrapped in the same bandages as his arms, making it hard to read his expression. Sensing there was someone behind him keeping watch, Dazai whispered into his hidden microphone, “Would’ve been a lot funnier if you’d been struck by lightning and died.”

“You want me to kick your ass?”

Dazai watched Chuuya as he emerged from the wreckage, grumpily blowing the flames off himself. Even though he appeared to have gotten caught in the blast, Chuuya didn't even have a scratch on him. Dazai, however, didn't seem the least bit surprised.

“You're five minutes late,” Dazai said before kicking the guard behind him into the air, rendering the man unconscious. “I got punched three times, you know,” he then joked.

Chuuya sneered. “How about I kill you with a fourth?”

“I'm not the one you'll be killing today,” Dazai claimed before shedding his handcuffs. He had actually gotten himself captured on purpose. Knocking out the guard and undoing his handcuffs were but simple tasks for Dazai.

He and Chuuya started to casually walk away when numerous masked men suddenly surrounded them. It appeared there were still enemies lurking in the shadows.

“Pathetic garbage wastin' my time...” Chuuya scowled.

“Just hurry up and get rid of them,” Dazai said with an annoyed tone. “It's not like you didn't see this coming.” But right as Chuuya was about to retort, he noticed a skill user approaching—a masked man with bolts of lightning coiled on his arms. It was the same person who had been prowling after him.

“...I almost forgot. I still owe ya for earlier.” Chuuya fixed a murderous glare on the lightning wielder.

The building shook from impact, crushed under the force. A dust cloud was forming as bodies, including the masked man's, covered the rooftop. Chuuya had used his skill.

Riding up the wall on his motorcycle, blowing away the flames from the explosion—all of this was possible because of Chuuya's ability.

Chuuya headed toward the building with Dazai, not even glancing at the piles of the dead he was responsible for. The man they were after was inside.

Once the two of them went down the emergency staircase, they discovered the inside of the building was rather run-down as well. The hallways were collecting dust, and there were signs of rats in various places. They walked in the direction where they sensed someone's presence until they arrived in a spacious room with office desks and shelves stacked in the corner. The telephone line had been cut, and the fluorescent lights were flickering. Valuable bills and securities had been thrown away with unimportant miscellaneous documents.

In the center of the room was what appeared to be some sort of strange pavilion. The man they were looking for was sitting inside. He

was muttering to himself, eyes downcast as he flung several things into a bucket of fire.

"It will be mine. It won't be mine. It will be mine. It won't be mine..."

It was as if he were picking flower petals and trying to tell his fortune. Except instead of flower petals, he was using banknotes and securities. There were even glittering gems in the bucket.

"It will be mine. It won't be mine. It will be mine. It won't be mine..."

The banknotes burned, the securities were ripped to shreds, and the gems were lapped up by the flames. Dazai looked at the stones and muttered, "Those jewels are all real... Ah, and that one was worth fifty million..."

Another large jewel was tossed into the fire with a clink.

"...It won't be mine." The man sighed. That seemed to have been the last of the gems. "Why does fate always mock me? It appears that not even forming a syndicate will get me what I want."

The flames illuminated the man's face as he crossed his arms. He had a pale complexion with white hair cascading down to his back. A single braid hung over his shoulders. Of all his attractive features, his lurid red eyes stood out the most.

Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

Killing this man would end the Dragon's Head Conflict. Chuuya took a step forward to get closer to the root of this tragedy.

"...Give me back my men," he quietly demanded. That was when Shibusawa lifted his head up as if he had finally noticed them.

"Welcome, my boring visitors." He turned his apathetic gaze to the two men. "I know neither of you will grant me my wish, either, so hurry up and die...like the rest of them."

A mist slowly rose behind Shibusawa, revealing something by his feet. Chuuya's eyes opened wide the moment he noticed what that was. It was Chuuya's colleagues—the six who had been missing. Each one of their pupils were dilated as they lay there unmoving. It was evident that they were already dead.

"All your friends committed suicide," Shibusawa continued. "Not even death can cure a boring person from being boring."

"You bastard...!" Chuuya went blind with rage. Red marks from his skill spread across his face. His clenched fist trembled, and his gloves burst into shreds. The marks even appeared on his now-bare arms. Chuuya unleashed his skill, surrendering himself to his rage. A gust of wind ruffled his hair.

"Don't even think about stoppin' me," Chuuya warned Dazai before facing Shibusawa.

"Sigh..." Dazai simply took a step back. "Dark Disgrace? Hmph..."

Chuuya's skill then began to go berserk. Screams. Roars. Explosions. Every kind of sound could be heard as the building itself started to crumble. The air trembled under the shock wave, launching rubble like bullets.



“...”

A man was watching the miserable sight from afar. He had shoulder-length black hair and eyes like violet crystals that glowed in the moonlight. His mantle flapped in the wind.

“Heh.”

He gave an innocent smirk, but he had a mysterious expression on his face. The man—Fyodor—mumbled to himself, his delicate fingers gliding through the sky as if he were playing an instrument: “...This is too much fun.”

Bullets rocketed through the air, gunfire echoed, asphalt was gorged out, and blood was spilled. The city was swallowed in the screams, cackling, and resentment of its people. Countless lives were lost, and irreversible damage was done during the Dragon's Head Conflict. This struggle, which started as a dispute over five hundred billion yen, turned Yokohama into a war zone. Some fought under the alias Twin Dark; others lost family and turned adrift; and one individual would end up adopting the children orphaned during the sanguinary war.

And six years later, a dragon began awakening from its slumber.

Undefeated
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

The
Matchless
Poet

Super
Deduction

Demon
Snow

Kashomon

CHAPTER I

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
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Human

Crime
and
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ment

All
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Are
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Thou
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1—1

A steam whistle echoed across the harbor, announcing that a ship was about to set sail. The strong afternoon sun reflected off the suspension bridge and the sea's surface. The ocean breeze blew by as the seagulls cried and flew away. A bell could be clearly heard ringing from afar.

This was the port city of Yokohama with its *mélange* of modern high-rises and stately brick buildings. Atsushi Nakashima restlessly looked down at the city from a hill as if he was searching for something. On his way down the staircase, he suddenly stopped, for he had discovered a cemetery plot surrounded by greenery.

"I wasn't expecting to find a cemetery here....," Atsushi quietly muttered to himself in awe and surprise. Surely it was no more than a few years old. Scores of white tombstones neatly lined the grounds, illuminated by the orange sunlight. Almost immediately, Atsushi saw the man he was looking for out of the corner of his eye, so he rushed over.

The man wore a light-brown overcoat and had unkempt black hair. His neck and hands were wrapped in bandages. He was sprawled out with his back against a tombstone, idly gazing up at the sky.

Osamu Dazai.

He was the one who gave Atsushi a place to belong and served as his mentor at the Armed Detective Agency. He also happened to be the person Atsushi was searching for. But before Atsushi even greeted Dazai, he stopped in front of the grave and calmly placed his hands together in a brief prayer.

"Do you even know whose grave this is?" Dazai softly asked out of the blue.

Puzzled, Atsushi replied, "No... But I know they're someone important to you, right?"

He glanced at the tombstone and saw the name S. ODA carved into it. Atsushi didn't know who that was, but he did know one thing: They had to be someone extremely meaningful to Dazai.

Dazai wore a faint smirk as he asked, "What makes you say that?"

“Because I’ve never seen you visit someone’s gravesite before.”

“Does it look like I’m visiting someone’s grave?” joked Dazai.

Atsushi, however, simply blinked. What was he talking about? It was a rather unique way to pay one’s respects; most people wouldn’t rest their head against a tombstone. But it was clear as day to Atsushi: Dazai was undoubtedly visiting someone’s grave. Hence, Atsushi didn’t exactly understand Dazai’s question, so he nodded and replied in earnest, “Yes, it does, actually...”

Dazai’s eyes slightly widened in wonderment at Atsushi’s sincerity until his lips wordlessly curled into a smile.

Dazai recalled the events of four years ago—memories of the dilapidated Western-style house’s ballroom covered in dust and blood.

“Be on the side that saves people... If both sides are the same, then choose to become a good person. Save the weak, protect the orphaned. You might not see a great difference between right and wrong, but...saving others is something just a bit more wonderful.”

“...”

He thought about his friend’s last words, then stared at his hands with a blank expression. Atsushi couldn’t tell how Dazai was feeling from his profile alone.

“So...” Atsushi spoke up as Dazai idly daydreamed. “Was this someone you used to be in love with, or...?”

“If this were a woman I loved, I would’ve died with her.”

“Yeah, I bet...,” Atsushi muttered to himself. Dazai then suddenly stood up and faced him.

“Did you say something?” he asked.

“Oh, uh... No, it’s nothing.” Atsushi averted his gaze.

“...He was a friend of mine,” Dazai added quietly. He then began slowly walking in Atsushi’s direction while seeming somewhat sentimental. He stared into the distance.

“He’s the reason I quit the Port Mafia and joined the agency. I’d probably still be killing people for the mafia if it wasn’t for him.”

“Huh...?!”

Atsushi was baffled. He had no idea whether that was true. What did Dazai mean by that? Curious, Atsushi turned around to face Dazai, but all he could see was his back. Nevertheless, before Atsushi could even get another word out...

“I’m kidding,” Dazai assured almost jokingly. The melancholy Atsushi felt from Dazai had disappeared, and Dazai continued to speak in his usual lighthearted manner.

“I’m guessing Kunikida asked you to find me, right?”

Atsushi suddenly remembered what he was here for. “Yes, we

have an important meeting.”

He originally came here because Kunikida ordered him to drag Dazai back to the agency.

“I’ll pass.”

“What?”

Dazai continued to briskly walk ahead with his back still turned to Atsushi. Atsushi shot him an accusatory gaze, but his mentor showed no signs of turning around.

“I just thought of a new way to kill myself, so I want to test it out.”

“Again...?” Atsushi muttered in exasperation before sighing as Dazai casually waved good-bye. There was nothing you could do to stop the man once he said he was going to try killing himself. All you could do was sigh. Atsushi simply watched as the sand-colored trench coat gently fluttered in the ocean breeze.

A few hours later, Atsushi returned to the Armed Detective Agency—a redbrick building near the port. He was heading to the conference room. After slowly opening the heavy door, he walked inside. The room was neither spacious nor cramped but had just the right amount of space for meetings. A large screen hung from a wall while a whiteboard stood by another. In the center of the room was a long table with close to a dozen people huddled around it—all members of an armed organization that oversaw the twilight that existed between the worlds of day and night.

The Armed Detective Agency was a group of skill users who handled cases in the port city of Yokohama that the authorities alone couldn't solve, and every policy and decision ever made was done here in this conference room. A silver-haired man took a seat near the entrance, where he had a clear view of everyone sitting at the table. His aura was very relaxed, just like his elegantly colored kimono. And yet, he was dignified with a sharp gaze, making it clear he was no ordinary man. A talented martial artist once known as Ginrou, the Silver Wolf, he was now president of the Armed Detective Agency. His name was Yukichi Fukuzawa.

An office clerk at the agency, Haruno stood diagonally behind Fukuzawa. She seemed to be something of a secretary. Standing in front of the screen with a red ribbon tied at his neck and his hair pulled back in a long ponytail was Doppo Kunikida. It looked like he was going to be conducting the meeting. Dressed in a collared shirt and vest that perfectly fit his tall frame, he adjusted his glasses with an extremely serious stare.

The individual already seated with a bunch of snacks scattered over the table was Ranpo Edogawa. He wore a cape with a loosely fitted tie and a flat cap, the kind of ensemble you would find in a Western detective novel. Ranpo was generally childlike and guileless, with innocent almond-shaped eyes that were nearly impossible to read. Nevertheless, he was the heart of the agency, and while he was just an ordinary human, he had an extraordinary brain that allowed him to uncover truths in the blink of an eye.

Sitting across from him was Akiko Yosano, her neatly trimmed hair grazing her shoulders complemented by a butterfly hairpin. She wore a well-fitted white collared shirt with a black tie, black skirt, and black gloves as if she were in mourning. She sat so quietly that no one

would ever doubt her wit and beauty...as long as she kept her mouth shut...

Compared to the majestic Yosano, the young man sitting next to her, Junichirou Tanizaki—essentially a salesclerk for the agency—had a face that just screamed helpless. He had light hair and a pale complexion and wore a slightly oversize, long-sleeved knit shirt that exposed his delicate-looking collarbone. A troubled expression crossed his face as his beautiful sister, Naomi Tanizaki, who was sitting by his side, nestled coquettishly next to him.

This was nothing new, but Naomi and Tanizaki were so uncomfortably close that Atsushi had to avert his gaze. However, the boy who sat across from Tanizaki—Kenji Miyazawa—didn't seem fazed in the least as he cheerfully chatted with Ranpo at his side. He was dressed in well-worn overalls and a straw hat. His friendly smile was accented by the freckles on his cheeks.

Sitting one seat away from Kenji, as if to distance herself from his cheerfulness, was a kimono-clad girl named Kyouka Izumi who had just recently joined the Armed Detective Agency. Her long black hair was bunched into two low pigtails with flower hair ties, and she had long, curved eyelashes. Her expression was still. While she seemed somewhat cold, Atsushi already knew that she really wasn't. He was sure the empty seat next to her was for him. In fact, her encouraging gaze prompted Atsushi to take the seat between her and Kenji. Even Kyouka, who was once used by the Port Mafia as an assassin for her skill *Demon Snow*, seemed to have adapted to the agency.

Fukuzawa, Haruno, Kunikida, Ranpo, Yosano, Tanizaki, Naomi, Kenji, Kyouka, and...Atsushi—all the agency members were present for the meeting, save for Dazai. Seeing so many gathered here, Atsushi could feel that the topic was going to be serious. He grew nervous. Just what had happened?

After everyone was seated, Kunikida turned off the lights. Then a video of a city was projected onto the screen. There was an old-fashioned-looking street with eye-catching brick buildings lined up one after another. It was unrefined yet somehow nostalgic. Displayed on the corner of the screen was the time and location: midnight, Dihua Street, Taiwan. After a few moments went by, the footage showed what appeared to be a faint mist beginning to rise. It was fog. It slowly rose, clearly getting denser as it engulfed the street. Once the street was completely hidden beneath the fog, the video was fast-forwarded.

"This is security footage from three years ago in Taipei, Taiwan," Kunikida solemnly explained. "As you can see, a dense fog appeared within a mere few minutes before vanishing. However, this was not

due to unusual weather.”

The fog cleared, and the footage was stopped before switching to another event. *Click*. A photo popped up on the screen. It appeared to be the same location as before, but it was a close-up of an alleyway between two brick buildings. A large crowd had gathered around something in the middle of the street. An even more zoomed-in photograph was displayed next, revealing what that “something” was. Lying facedown on the ground—

“A suspicious body was discovered after the fog cleared... The burnt corpse you see here.”

—were the charred remains of a human.

Whatever did this to the victim was so hot that even the ground was scorched. Obviously, no hair or clothes remained on the corpse, but there were no bones left, either. There was no way to make out the victim’s face or features—and understandably so. It was so grotesque that Atsushi began to feel sick. “How awful,” he couldn’t help but murmur. Burning a body until it carbonized wasn’t something someone in their right mind would do—that is, if this were done by human hand.

Atsushi knit his brow as the others fell silent after witnessing such a horrific sight. Ranpo, however, made an observation as he chomped away at his snacks:

“They’re a skill user.”

“Precisely. Impressive as always, Ranpo.” Doppo Kunikida complimented his colleague with a firm nod. “Specifically, a fire-wielding skill user well-known in the area.”

Kunikida then pressed a button on the remote and displayed the next photograph.

“This is a picture of Singapore, one year ago.”

The screen showed a Merlion statue with its lion head and fish body. However, the focus wasn’t on the area of the white statue commonly seen in magazines—the front side that faced the bay—but its back. A man was crucified to it with his arms and legs listlessly hanging. His skin had turned pale, but most surprising of all were the countless red and black playing cards piercing his body. He was very clearly dead.

“Sure enough, that same thick fog appeared, and immediately after it dissipated, another suspicious body was found. He was a highly skilled assassin with the ability to manipulate playing cards,” Kunikida explained with a detached tone before clicking the remote again. The picture of the mutilated body disappeared, replaced with a photograph of a woman impaled by icicles.

“This happened half a year ago in Detroit. You get the gist: This body was found after the fog as well.”

The photo showed a busy street surrounded by high-rise buildings, yet for some reason, there were numerous icicles jutting out of the ground. The colossal, crystal-clear spears had pierced the woman high in the air, killing her. Kunikida continued: "As you have probably guessed, she was an ice-wielding skill user."

"In other words..." began Fukuzawa, "...following this mysterious fog, skill users around the world have died after using their own skills on themselves."

Kenji immediately turned to Kunikida. "Does that mean this fog is somehow responsible for what happened to them?"

He'd phrased it in the form of a question, but it was more of a confirmation. It would be hard to believe that the bizarre deaths of the skill users and the fog covering the city were unrelated.

"There have been one hundred and twenty-eight confirmed cases considered to be of the same nature. Over five hundred skill users have died as a result," Kunikida replied. He pushed up his glasses with his index finger. "The Special Division for Unusual Powers refers to this chain of events as the Serial Skill User Suicide Phenomenon. And speaking of suicide..."

Kunikida suddenly looked up, and a cold chill shot down Atsushi's spine.

Oh, crap, Atsushi thought.

"...what happened to that idiot Dazai?" Kunikida asked.

I knew he was gonna ask! Who else besides Dazai would come to mind with the word suicide?

Atsushi's shoulders slumped dramatically. Kyouka shot him a quizzical look, but this was no time to be worried about that. Atsushi didn't want to answer Kunikida's question...but he didn't have any other choice. His expression tense, Atsushi replied, "...He apparently thought of a new way to kill himself."

"That oxygen-stealing bastard...!" Kunikida screamed to no one's surprise.

I knew this would happen, thought Atsushi. It was understandable, though. There were only so many times Dazai could do this to Kunikida before he lost his temper. It had become such a regular occurrence that Atsushi was actually starting to sympathize with Kunikida, even. Both Kunikida's face and voice were burning with rage. But while Kunikida was furiously giving him an earful of what he should have done, Atsushi suddenly heard Ranpo mutter, "I see..."

Ranpo then began packing his cherished snacks into the office safe as if he had just thought of something. Kenji curiously tilted his head to the side. "What are you doing?" he said.

"It's a secret." Ranpo smirked as he continued to stuff his snacks into the safe while Kenji sat there, confused. After shooting the two of

them a quick glance, Tanizaki knit his brow and asked, "So does every skill user commit suicide when they touch this fog?"

He was clearly concerned, but a moment later, Naomi threw her arms around him.

"I would never let that happen to you! I can't have you kill yourself and leave me behind!"

With an enraptured gaze, Naomi tightened her grip around him... then tightened some more.

"N-Naomi...?"

Tanizaki panicked, but Naomi paid him no mind. Her cheeks turned red for some reason as she nearly strangled him in her arms.

"You're suffocating me! You're suffocating meeeeeee!" Tanizaki yelled while Yosano calmly spoke up.

"So what does all of this have to do with us?" she asked as she looked at the documents in her hands. "I know you're not just asking us to be careful because we're skill users, too."

Kunikida nodded solemnly after he'd finished giving Atsushi an earful.

"We've received an inquiry from the Special Division for Unusual Powers to investigate the incidents," he firmly replied. "They learned that the man assumed to be involved in these suicides has made his way to Yokohama, so they have asked us to search for and capture him."

Atsushi sat straight up in surprise. It wasn't difficult to imagine how dangerous this was going to be. *Click. Click.* Kunikida clicked the remote.

"...This is our target."

On the screen was a picture of a frail young man with long, wavy white hair and a pale complexion reminiscent of snow, with crimson eyes that glowed dimly. The only things known about him were his nationality, name, and age. Every other entry had *Unknown* written next to it.

"Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, twenty-nine years old. All we know about him is that he is some sort of skill user and goes by the alias the Collector."

"The Collector...", Kenji repeated. Atsushi's shoulders trembled slightly.

The Collector. Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

Atsushi gazed at the man's picture as if his name was drawing him in. It felt like Shibusawa was quietly staring right back at him. Even though he knew that wasn't possible, Atsushi thought he would start seeing things if he kept looking into the eyes of the man in the picture.

"..."

All of a sudden, he was overcome by an odd sensation—as if there

was something like a door in the depths of his heart.

I mustn't open it.

The thought mysteriously came to him, and he began to zone out wondering what "it" was.

"What's wrong?" Kyouka asked, snapping Atsushi out of his trance. Even after taking a second look at Tatsuhiko Shibusawa's photograph, he didn't get that odd feeling he got a moment ago. Perhaps it was just his imagination.

"...It's nothing."

Atsushi smirked to himself and shook his head. The lights were suddenly turned on with a click, instantly brightening the conference room. Now that everyone was able to see one another, Fukuzawa made an announcement: "The Armed Detective Agency will be taking this job."

Everyone's expression grew tense. Atsushi straightened his spine before looking over at Fukuzawa.

"The victims in every one of these cases have been skill users," Fukuzawa stated. "This is also to protect the lives of you all here at the agency. More than anything, I get the sense that ignoring this case will only invite even greater public harm."

Atsushi pursed his lips at the ominous prediction. That was something that had to be avoided at all costs. He waited for Fukuzawa's next words with bated breath. Then, with a piercing gaze, Fukuzawa declared: "The search for this man starts now. Do everything and anything you can to find him."



Two men softened their footsteps under the moonlight. They were at the warehouse district near the Yokohama port with its many rusted storehouses. The light from the Bay Bridge, which was just visible from between the storehouses, made the area feel even darker. There were no streetlights or signs of any other people. A deep silence blanketed the district, making it the perfect place for a secret rendezvous. A tall, bespectacled man was walking alongside a younger, frail-looking man—Kunikida and Tanizaki.

“...What do you think, Kunikida?” Tanizaki asked hesitantly.

“About what?”

“Do you think serial suicides are even a real thing?”

Tanizaki’s eyes briefly darted in Kunikida’s direction. Kunikida’s expression remained unchanged for a few moments before he eventually answered the question.

“It’s hard to say,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Even if this man had some kind of mind-control skill, then international intelligence agencies would surely have information on someone that powerful...”

And yet, their client, the Special Division for Unusual Powers, had absolutely no information on him. Tanizaki lowered his gaze despondently after finally grasping the reality of the situation.

“Well, I really hope the Division agent we’re about to meet has some new intel on the guy...,” he said with a sigh as he continued to walk by Kunikida’s side. The area was so quiet they could hear each other breathing. The moon was extraordinarily large that night—a full moon, perhaps?—and shone down on them.

They were close to the rendezvous point, and it wasn’t long before they stopped in their tracks in front of an alleyway between two storehouses. Kunikida rolled up his sleeves to check his watch. It was 7:59:45 PM—fifteen seconds before the meeting time. Kunikida made absolutely sure to set his watch to the time signal broadcast every morning, so there was no doubting it. He nodded confidently. They were perfectly on schedule. However...

“...? He’s not here yet,” muttered Kunikida. “This should be the place...”

“Kunikida!” Tanizaki shrieked after surveying their surroundings. Kunikida immediately looked up before following Tanizaki’s nervous gaze. He didn’t have so much as a moment to reply before he saw someone collapsed in the alleyway. It was a man in an unblemished

business suit and slightly scuffed shoes. His limbs were completely limp. A pool of blood slowly crept out from underneath his body, its vivid crimson hue clear as day as the pale moonlight reflected off it.

“...!”

Kunikida and Tanizaki reacted the moment they noticed the motionless, silent body. Kunikida promptly drew his gun tucked behind his belt before lowering his posture and rushing toward the body. Tanizaki simultaneously drew his own gun that he was concealing and got into his stance. They held their weapons at the ready while standing back-to-back by the body while surveying the area.

It didn't even take more than a few seconds for them to prepare for battle after discovering the collapsed man. They listened closely, looking for any signs of the enemy. Kunikida then placed two fingers on the man's neck—his carotid artery. The man was warm, but there was no pulse. Not much time had gone by; he must have been killed minutes before they arrived. Nevertheless, there were no signs of anyone else around.

...Had the attacker already escaped?

“Kunikida?” Tanizaki called out, wondering what happened. Kunikida then tucked away his pistol and said, “It's the Division agent... He's dead.”

Tanizaki jumped, then turned his head and looked back as if he couldn't believe what he had heard. Kunikida crouched down by the body where he had suddenly noticed something on the ground. He took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and used it to pick that something up so he wouldn't get his fingerprints on it. Tanizaki, who was still holding his gun at the ready, couldn't see what it was, though.

“What's wrong?” Tanizaki anxiously asked. However, Kunikida didn't respond. He simply stood up with *that something* in his hands. It was unnatural. Extremely unnatural. Clearly, this object hadn't just fallen there by chance. If anything, it felt like it was some sort of message to Kunikida. He furrowed his brow slightly and whispered, “Did the criminal leave this behind?”

Wondering what Kunikida was talking about, Tanizaki lowered his gun and turned around. That was when he finally saw what Kunikida was holding.

It was an apple as red as the blood it was found next to. The moonlight gleamed off its smooth surface. This wasn't a prop or a bomb of any sort. It was, without a doubt, a simple fruit...save for the fact that there was a knife sticking out of it as if to condemn the taste of sin.

A blade had been driven into the symbol of original sin. A dreary, ominous aura oozed from the ripe fruit like venom.

“What’s that?” asked Tanizaki, but Kunikida shook his head. This wasn’t enough information to go by. All that was clear was that this was left by the murderer. The criminal might have used the knife to kill the agent as well.

“Why an apple?” Tanizaki quietly muttered.

“Hell if I know,” Kunikida spat in frustration. Juice from the apple dripped down the knife and onto the ground, leaving a tiny puddle.

The starting bell was already ringing.

Interlude 1

Classic jazz was playing softly in the background.

This windowless basement pub had a mellow atmosphere to it. The dingy pale-orange lighting illuminated the empty bottles lined up against the wall. The antique counter and stools had aged to a dark caramel brown, and the wood grain had developed a nice texture.

Amid the pleasant music was an ice-filled glass garnished with white alyssum flowers. The ice inside faintly hit the glass, creating a pleasant clink. A man named Sakunosuke Oda used to sit in that seat. The drink on the counter was the same brand of liquor he used to always order as well. But there was no hand to throw back that drink anymore, nor even a single soul in that seat.

The glass and the flowers sat together in solitude before the empty seat. Dazai gazed at it out of the corner of his eye as he picked up his drink. He was in his usual spot—the seat next to Odasaku’s—and he was talking to the empty space next to him as if Odasaku were still there.

“What’ll we toast to today?”

“You’re not gonna wait for Ango to get here?”

Dazai could practically hear his friend’s voice.

“...”

He slowly raised his glass among the silence, thinking back to a conversation from a time long gone. It was a few years ago. Sitting in the same seat in the same pub, Dazai had flashed a grin at Odasaku.

“I know what we could talk about.”



“I heard something interesting the other day,” said Dazai under the pale lighting. His expression was hidden beneath the bandages wrapped around one side of his face, perhaps from getting injured in a fight or from trying out a new method of suicide.

“Ever heard of apple suicide?” he asked.

“...Apple suicide?”

Odasaku shot him a quizzical look. They were mindlessly chatting about nothing like they always did at their usual bar. Dazai quietly

noded.

“Yep. Apple suicide.”

“Oh...”

Odasaku seemed to have thought of something. He then lowered his gaze and took a sip of his amber-colored beverage. “Like Cinderella, huh?”

Clink.

The ice refreshingly hit the glass.

“Cinderella...”

Surprised, Dazai repeated the name.

“Hmm...,” he muttered in a troubled manner as he tapped his middle finger on his forehead.

“Not even I could’ve predicted you’d say that. I seriously never get tired of talking to you, Odasaku,” Dazai said gleefully as he looked up at the ceiling. Odasaku, on the other hand, had no idea what was so amusing to him, and that seemed to make Dazai even more amused. Dazai turned to Odasaku smiling radiantly.

“Allow me to explain.” He leaned in to get a closer look at Odasaku. “Snow White is the one who ate the poison apple, and it wasn’t to commit suicide.”

“Oh. My mistake.”

Odasaku apologized. Dazai’s jocular mood didn’t bother him in the least. However...

“Hmm? Hold on...” Dazai placed a thumb on his chin and suddenly got lost in thought. Curious, Odasaku looked over at him, when...

“...Maybe Snow White *did* kill herself,” Dazai murmured softly. “Maybe she took a bite of the poisoned apple knowing it was poisoned.”

“Why would she do that?”

Odasaku stared at his friend, unsure of what he meant.

“Despair,” Dazai replied with a facetious grin. “She had lost all hope when her own mother gave her that poisoned apple— No...”

He paused, then idly gazed up at the ceiling as if he was giving this more than a passing thought. In a crystal-clear voice, he then said, “Perhaps it was a more nebulous form of despair. Perhaps she had lost all hope in the world itself...”

It was an alarming sight—Dazai sounded like he was in a trance. It was as if he was ignoring all this world had to offer while in pursuit of something else.

“...”

Odasaku silently stared at his friend, who longed for something beyond his reach. Then, Dazai briefly chuckled. “Wouldn’t that be something?” he said. Still laughing, he continued, “I met an

interesting skill user recently.”

He slowly lowered his gaze, and his lips curled in amusement. Perhaps he was thinking about this person or their skill. His lips distorted into a crooked smile.

“He can *make* people commit apple suicide,” said Dazai. There was something peculiar about his smirk. “Maybe it’ll start catching on in Yokohama one day.”

“Suicide, you mean?” asked Odasaku, still staring at his friend.

“Yep.” Dazai nodded before turning to Odasaku. “Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

When Odasaku finally saw the smile on Dazai’s face, it reminded him of a young, innocent child. He continued to stare, trying to scrutinize what Dazai really meant, but he would never know, no matter how long he looked. After all, Dazai was a master at keeping his true intent hidden. That’s why Odasaku simply shook his head, gave up, and took another sip of his drink before simply offering a thought of his own instead.

“You’re an interesting guy. Your mind never stops working.”

But Dazai’s reply surprised him.

“I’m not as interesting as you, Odasaku.” Dazai smirked.

Odasaku was inwardly puzzled by those words. He had never found himself to be an interesting man, which was why he had no idea what Dazai meant, so he decided to ignore it, convincing himself that Dazai was simply joking. He was always kidding around, after all. He was no longer in a trance like earlier, and he wasn’t acting odd anymore, either. So Odasaku looked over at the bar’s doorway and casually mentioned that “Ango sure is late today,” just like he always did.

That used to be routine, but it was now all in the past—never to return.



“...Ango isn’t coming,” Dazai replied to Odasaku’s casual remark from years ago. So many things had changed since then. Odasaku was no longer by his side, and Ango didn’t come to this pub anymore. Dazai now sat at the counter alone. He was waiting for no one. He simply gazed at the amber liquid in his glass. The ice clinked in the liquor glass garnished with white alyssum flowers as if Odasaku had replied. Dazai then quietly whispered, “You were right, Odasaku,” and he picked up his glass.

“It’s certainly wonderful to be on the side that saves others.”

Next to the glass was a white-and-red pill. "...If you plan on living, that is," he added.

Dazai then reached for the pill with his bandaged hand, neatly picked it up, and slowly brought it to his lips—just like Snow White and the sweet, poisoned apple. The venomous-red-and-pure-white pill disappeared inside his mouth. Dazai reluctantly stood up from his chair.

"See you around, Odasaku."

After bidding his farewell, he pulled something out of his overcoat pocket and placed it on the counter. And just like that, he retired from the bar without looking back. His footsteps mingled with the classic jazz playing in the background until they could be heard no more. All that remained on the counter before his seat was his glass...

...and a red apple skewered with a knife.

The forbidden fruit's sweet scent of death filled the room.



Outside, the night breeze brushed against Dazai's bare skin. The bell rang as the door slowly closed. He passed by the pub's sign. The streetlight flickered, and the asphalt was cold. Dazai set foot in a less-tidy world.

"Dazai," a monotone voice called out to him from behind. It was a young man wearing glasses and an academic-looking suit.

Ango Sakaguchi—a man who used to work and drink side by side with Dazai and Odasaku as an informant for the Port Mafia. He'd turned out to be a double agent who had been working for the Special Division for Unusual Powers the entire time.

"Oh, Ango. I didn't know you were here," claimed Dazai without even looking back. "Did you stop by for a drink?"

Dazai didn't even seem surprised by the appearance of an old friend. His smile was calm and unaffected. Ango, on the other hand, wore a stiff expression as he replied:

"No, I'm here on business."

"Business?"

"This."

Immediately, over a dozen Special Forces soldiers in black wordlessly appeared and aimed their silenced submachine guns right at Dazai's chest. This wasn't a bluff, though. The safeties were off. Their fingers were resting on the triggers, ready to fire if Dazai tried anything funny.

"You're the one who brought Tatsuhiko Shibusawa to Yokohama,

aren't you?" Ango asked in a stern voice.

"..."

Dazai reacted to the accusation by slowly turning to face Ango and fix him with an icy glare. He was extremely calm despite having nowhere to run—it was almost unnatural. He regarded Ango like one would look at rubbish. Nevertheless, Ango nervously asked, "Do you plan to start a mass suicide of skill users here in Yokohama?"

What Ango didn't realize, though, was that there was a shadow slowly approaching him from behind. The Special Division agents didn't notice either as they surrounded Dazai. Dazai's lips twisted into a smirk as if this were all merely child's play to him.

The next moment, Dazai seemed like a completely different person.

"Did you really think you could catch me?" he asked.

"...!"

A chill shot down Ango's spine from an absolute terror that he couldn't put his finger on. It was malice presented by a beautiful face. It was the feeling that there was a monster nearby. It was the depths of darkness and an overbearing, intimidating air. Ango felt as if he saw a glimpse of something that shouldn't exist in this world. The cold-blooded smirk was like nothing he had ever seen. He didn't know this Dazai. He seemed far too cruel. But by the time Ango realized this, it was already too late.

An ominous white fog had slowly crept up behind Ango.

Undefeated
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

The
Matchless
Poet

Super
Deduction

Demon
Snow

Kashomon

CHAPTER II

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

All
Men
Are
Equal

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

CHAPTER II

2—1

“Get out, you parasite!”

A tall building stretched up toward the heavens. It was a beautiful white church decorated with vividly colored stained glass and detailed sculptures. In the center was Atsushi, trembling. His body wouldn't move, overcome with fear. It took everything he had to simply crawl on the frigid stone flooring. How? Why? He had so many questions, but he couldn't think clearly. Cold sweat dripped down his pale face.

Atsushi knew where this was.

It was the orphanage he grew up in. A place he left long ago. So why was he here now?

The trauma of days gone resurfaced; his breathing grew shallow. There were footsteps. He looked up with a gasp to find familiar faces staring down at him. They had worked at the orphanage.

“Your kind isn't welcome here!”

The verbal abuse made Atsushi realize what was happening: This was a memory. A scene from his distant past—days of loneliness and humiliation he didn't wish to remember.

Is it that I don't want to remember? Or that I can't remember...?

The scenery before him was suddenly distorted, and a door appeared behind the orphanage workers. It was a sturdy-looking white door, majestic and divine. Atsushi's eyes were drawn to it, but he felt that shouldn't be disturbed. It was a forbidden gate that must absolutely never be opened.

I mustn't open it. I mustn't open it. I mustn't open it...

Atsushi kept repeating those words to himself. His body froze with fear, and he couldn't stop trembling. Not even Atsushi himself knew why, though. The fear wreaked havoc on his mind and almost instinctively shackled him to the ground.

I mustn't open it. I mustn't open it. I mustn't open it.

That door mustn't be opened at all costs.

"Society would be better off if you just died."

"You don't belong in this world."

The vitriol echoed throughout the church. Fog slowly began to creep out from behind the door as if it were reacting to the orphanage director's voice. Atsushi wondered what was going on, but his curiosity was short-lived. The orphanage workers were gone before he even realized it, and the fog was racing toward him. His eyes opened wide with fear.

"...!"

Fog. Fog. Fog.

All he could see was the pure-white fog as it swallowed his body. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. The mist forced its way into his mouth, and he felt as though he were being controlled. It hurt to breathe. He couldn't breathe. He was being eaten alive by the fog. He was going to be consumed and die.

That was when he woke up.



Atsushi opened his eyes and sat up with a gasp. There was only darkness. He panted, confused as to where he was. His entire body was drenched in sweat, and a light blanket clung to his skin. Atsushi finally realized where he was as his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. He was in his room in the company dormitory. Inside the closet, to be exact.

"That was just a dream...?"

He was still gasping for air, but he felt a little more at ease knowing he'd dreamed it all.

Everything's okay. I'm not the same person I was when I lived at the orphanage. I have friends. I have a place where I belong—at the Armed Detective Agency. Things are different now.

Suddenly, someone called out to Atsushi from the other side of the sliding door while he was taking a few deep breaths:

"Can I come in?"

It was Kyouka.

"Oh. Sure..."

A pale light peeked into the closet as she slid open the door. It was still nighttime. She must have turned on the lights. She was still wearing her pajamas as she closely examined Atsushi's face.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

“...You sounded like you were having a bad dream.”

Kyouka lowered her gaze in a worried manner. Atsushi and Kyouka were currently living together in the agency dormitory. Of course, Atsushi wouldn't dream of sleeping in the same room as her, so he decided to take the closet. Be that as it may, it was still a closet. The sliding door was thin, and it was far, far from being soundproof.

On top of that, Kyouka was a former assassin—and a highly skilled one at that. She would easily be able to sense anything out of sorts...which was why she woke up to the sound of Atsushi's voice and started to worry. When Atsushi looked over her shoulder, he noticed her futon had already been made. It must've been a little while since she'd noticed he was moaning in his sleep. He started to feel guilty and decided to tell her the truth despite his embarrassment.

“Yeah, just a bit of a nightmare.”

“...!”

Kyouka immediately leaned forward and brought her face closer to his.

“W-wait, Kyouka?!”

Atsushi panicked. He wasn't used to seeing her so close-up—and in her pajamas, at that. But what she said next sent a chill down his spine. Kyouka stared at him intently and asked, “...Did you see any fog in your dream?”

“...What?”

His face tensed, for he became bizarrely sure of something. He immediately raced out of the closet and opened the window.

All he could see was white fog.

Fog. Fog. Fog.

Just like in his dream, the area was thick with fog. It was as if the night scenery of Yokohama, which he was so used to seeing from the window, had been engulfed by the mist. Atsushi stared vacantly at the sight.

“Is this...?” he muttered. A moment later, he heard Kyouka behind him flip open her phone.

“I'm not getting any signal,” she announced abruptly. Atsushi started searching for his own phone in a panic. He vaguely remembered leaving it near his futon, so he rushed over to the closet and grabbed it. He pressed the call button—no signal.

The situation was dire. Atsushi was so flustered that he bumped his head on the divider in the closet. A dull, throbbing pain ran through his skull. Nevertheless, there was no time to roll around in agony, so he simply rubbed his head while showing Kyouka his phone.

“...Me either.”

A white fog and disconnected phones—Atsushi's gut was telling him that something was wrong.

“Is this the fog that’s been making skill users kill themselves...?” he muttered after sluggishly crawling out of the closet. Kyouka, who was looking out the window, turned her gaze to him.

“Let’s go to the agency.”

“Huh? Now? Like, right now?” Atsushi was taken aback by her sudden, blunt proposal. His eyes wandered as sweat beaded on his cheek. “Don’t you think we should wait until morning?”

Kyouka, however, looked dead serious. It was clear that she had already made up her mind. Nevertheless, Atsushi didn’t back down yet. With a trembling voice, he squeaked, “Maybe the fog will clear up by th—”

But he never got the chance to finish that sentence.

Towering high-rise buildings, a giant redbrick warehouse, a historic city hall building, the Bay Bridge stretching into the distance—the city was eerily silent under the fog. Not a soul in sight.

Although it was far past midnight, it seemed odd that there was not a single person in the shopping arcade, on the Ferris wheel in the amusement park, or even in the park by the sea. There was just white fog. Kyouka boldly strode down the misty street while Atsushi timidly followed, their footsteps echoing against the cobblestone paving.

Is it really okay to be walking outside? Shouldn't we just wait for the others to contact us? Atsushi couldn't help but wonder, even though he knew there was no way they could have contacted the agency. He couldn't stop trembling at the thought of mysterious fog driving skill users to suicide, and he instinctively wrapped his arms around his body and leaned forward as he walked. It was hard to believe that Kyouka could be so courageous at a time like this.

"Um... Kyouka?"

Crash! There was a roar the moment Atsushi called out her name.

"...!"

It was the sound of something large breaking. Kyouka immediately sprinted in the direction of the crash.

"Kyouka!" yelled Atsushi as he chased after her. Around the corner, they found a car that had collided into a traffic light. The bumper was mangled, and the car was hanging over the guardrail. It must have been going rather fast for this to have happened.

Kyouka ran in front of the car and peeked inside. Atsushi cautiously approached the vehicle as well, wondering if the passengers were all right. There was a crack in the windshield but no blood. In fact, nobody was injured—the car was empty. There was no one in the back, in the passenger's seat, or even in the driver's seat. What had happened, then? Who drove this car into the traffic light?

Someone had to be driving the car, so why...?

"What's going on?"

Atsushi's thought escaped his lips. This ominous sensation wouldn't go away. He suddenly looked up and gasped at what he saw.

"Kyouka...", uttered Atsushi hoarsely. Kyouka followed his gaze, and her eyes opened wide just like his.

"...!"

On the main road up the street from the totaled car were even

more wrecked vehicles.

A pileup accident. Multiple collisions. An explosion—numerous possibilities sprang to Atsushi's mind. Over a dozen cars had collided into one another and were piled up at the end of the street like a bunch of broken toys. Columns of black smoke rose into the air. Atsushi had never seen an accident of such scale, so he sprinted ahead, unable to take it any longer.

What happened? Can we save anyone? He ran over to each beat-up vehicle to check inside...but he didn't find a single passenger. Both the streets and the cars were empty. Kyouka looked around as well, but her experience was no different. The entire situation was unnatural to begin with. Where were the police? Where were the ambulances?

Atsushi and Kyouka exchanged glances, then started to search the city: the back roads, the police station, inside fast-food joints. Even though the lights were still on, there was nobody in sight. Next to a half-eaten bowl of soba noodles was a phone, as if someone had just been using it a few seconds ago.

Steam was still rising from the coffee at the seat next to it. It was as if all the city's inhabitants had just vanished into thin air. When Atsushi really thought about it, he realized that he and Kyouka hadn't seen anyone since they'd left the dormitory. He'd thought it was odd, but he never expected it would be this bad.

A white mist floated softly through the air as if to conceal the abandoned city. An eerie chill crawled up Atsushi's body. None of this felt real. Was there really such an absurd skill that could make an entire city full of people disappear? He couldn't completely deny the possibility. After all, he had seen a skill weapon that could instantly wipe out tens of thousands of people in the blink of an eye. Could this be the fog's—the Collector's—skill, then? What was happening to this city?

Suddenly, Atsushi felt as if he could hear a small child crying in the distance. But when he listened close, he couldn't believe his ears.

— *“Get out, you parasite!”*

Atsushi froze when he heard a voice coming from the void. What was happening? The orphanage director couldn't be there, so why could he hear their voice? Where was it coming from? Atsushi mustered up the courage to scan his surroundings, but he and Kyouka were the only ones present. Of course, the director wasn't anywhere in sight. But the moment Atsushi wished he was just hearing things, he sensed a presence behind him and spun around.

— *“You don't belong in this world.”*

The orphanage director emerged from the wavering fog as if Atsushi's dream had come to life. *This...can't be good*, he thought. Sensing danger, Atsushi's defensive instincts kicked in.

"Kyouka." He immediately called out to her. She braced herself for battle and whispered sharply, "...I sense bloodlust, and it's strong."

She strained her eyes and focused on a single point before sprinting forward.

"...!"

Atsushi cried out her name and chased after her, but he briefly glanced back once more. There was only empty space where he saw the director—a perfectly normal street lined with various buildings.

What was that? he wondered. But thinking would get Atsushi nowhere, so he continued to chase after Kyouka, hoping to clear his head.



There was a car flipped over on its side in the middle of the road with blood splattered across its underside, its wheels, and the pavement beneath where the blood trickled into the gutter. The crimson trail continued down the road into the deep fog as if something had been dragged in that direction. This was where Kyouka's senses led her.

"Blood..."

Atsushi grimaced at the pungent stench. He felt nauseous. The amount of blood made it clear that the victim was no dog or cat. It was human.

Another skill-assisted suicide? But there's no body...

While Atsushi stood paralyzed with fear, Kyouka calmly observed the pool of blood. But the moment she noticed the trail it left...

Snap. Crack.

There was *something* at the end of the trail, hidden within the fog.

The hairs on Atsushi's body stood on end. Whatever it was, it was breaking apart something hard and stiff...as if it were snapping and shattering bones. *Snap. Crack.* He felt an ominous presence coming from the depths of the fog. Surely encountering whatever that *something* was would not end well. Atsushi felt weak in the knees. Kyouka, however, started to walk ahead without so much as a moment's hesitation, following the trail of blood. Atsushi, while a few steps behind, soon followed in a fluster. There was no time to waste. The trail cut through the road, leading to the entrance of an office building. The building was completely dark, perhaps due to the lights

not being on, but they could still hear the snapping and cracking.

Something was inside the building, but there was no telling what it was. If this thing was responsible for all the blood like the two of them imagined—if it was still feasting on the victim's bones, then whatever this something was had to be considerably powerful. The remains of the violent massacre were further proof that they had to be careful. Was this a skill user? Or was it something different completely? Although nervous, Atsushi tailed Kyouka as she boldly pushed forward.

Atsushi was well aware he had been keeping behind Kyouka ever since they left the dormitory. But the nightmare, the ominous fog, the unknown killer—it was all terrifying. He couldn't help but be frightened. Aware of his cowardice but lacking the means to keep it in check, Atsushi fearfully continued ahead. Nevertheless, right as they started getting closer to the building, that *something* turned its murderous sights at them. It roared like a beast.

“...!”

Atsushi and Kyouka braced themselves for combat. The beast's eyes glowed amid the darkness as it lunged with a ferocious roar and jumped from building to building. It was so fast that only its shadow could be seen. All Atsushi knew was that it was massive.

“...!”

It threw itself at Atsushi with extraordinary speed. Atsushi dodged the attack, albeit just barely. Sheer dumb luck. He wasn't confident he'd be able to evade another.

Crap, this is bad. A cold sweat drenched Atsushi's back.

The beast had flown by Atsushi in the blink of an eye, and he didn't get a good look at it. By the time he realized the beast was there, it had already passed him by. There was no way to visually keep up with it. After Atsushi dodged its attack, the beast leaped back onto the building wall, then launched itself at Kyouka and Atsushi once again. They were going to be killed at this rate.

Atsushi practically started trembling before the formidable foe, but he fought through the fear and prepared for battle. He couldn't show any openings, for any careless mistake would land him the same fate of the person bleeding out on the street. Without even glancing at his side, he knew that Kyouka was thinking the same thing.

“Let's do this!” he said to her.

The two of them called upon their weapons to defeat the mysterious black beast.

“Skill: Beast Beneath the Moonlight!”

“Skill: Demon Snow!”

Atsushi's skill could transform him into a tiger. Kyouka's allowed her to manifest an ominous phantom wielding a sword. Both were

powerful enough for them to annihilate their foe. However...
...nothing happened.

Atsushi didn't turn into a tiger, nor did Kyouka's phantom ever appear. No reaction at all.

"What the...?!"

Atsushi was at a loss for words, and Kyouka's eyes opened wide in astonishment. This had never happened before. Amid their shock, the mysterious beast roared, then lunged at them.

"...!"

Kyouka stiffly grabbed Atsushi by the arm and instantly took off. He ran as she dragged him through the city with its inorganic facades made of concrete, iron, and stone. It was as if Yokohama had been frozen in time. Explosions could be heard in the background as white smoke billowed up into the sky. It was obvious that the beast was barreling through cars or whatever got into its way as it chased them. Each impact smashed in the asphalt, sending dust storms into the air.

They could feel small pieces of gravel pelt their backs as they fled. Using cars as barricades, sprinting through narrow alleys, or even suddenly changing directions made little difference. The beast simply knocked the cars out of the way, blew down the buildings, and swiftly kept up with them before cutting them off. Vehicles soared through the air before crashing and burning while buildings collapsed, leaving clouds of dust. No matter where they ran, the beast didn't give up. It relentlessly chased them, but they had no means of dealing with its overpowering strength and speed, for neither of them could use their skill.

Pant! Pant! Pant! Pant! Atsushi was gasping for air as he ran. He couldn't let the beast catch him if he wanted to live. Even if it hurt to breathe—even if his heart and lungs felt like they were going to explode—even if his leg muscles felt like they were going to rupture, he couldn't stop. Atsushi wasn't getting enough oxygen to his brain; he thought he was going to faint. How much farther would he have to run? He felt as if he could hear the beast breathing right down his neck, and a cold sweat trickled down his skin. Like the footsteps of the grim reaper, the sounds of destruction seemed to be rapidly approaching. He was scared. He was afraid to die—afraid to be killed. Sheer terror gripped Atsushi's entire being. The beast roared, and the force of its breath alone whipped their hair around. They had to be quicker. They had to run farther.

"...!"

But when Atsushi raced around the corner, he tripped over something.

"Augh...!"

His foolish scream echoed across the intersection.

Atsushi looked at what he tripped over, and his eyes opened wide.

“Kunikida?!”

A tall, bespectacled man was crouched at the intersection, perhaps from being knocked over when Atsushi smacked into him. His ponytail shook as he grimaced. There was no doubt about it. It was Kunikida. Atsushi and Kyouka had finally met someone in this empty city, and it was their dependable senior agent, to boot.

“...Atsushi?” Kunikida painfully muttered. His clothes were stained with blood, and his right arm and left side were injured. The wound seemed especially severe on his left side, where his clothes were darkened with blood. He clutched his ribs as if in pain.

“You’re hurt...!” Atsushi rushed over and knelt down next to Kunikida the moment he saw he was injured. “Were you shot?!”

“The bullets passed through me. I’m fine. More importantly...” Kunikida wore a serious expression and continued, “...I figured out the mystery behind the serial suicides.”

“...!”

Atsushi’s eyes widened. He sensed Kyouka’s body tense up as well. But before he could even question Kunikida about it, there was an explosion close by. The mysterious beast had already caught up with them.

Bam! With a powerful thud, the beast landed on the hood of a nearby car. But it was hidden within the fog, and only its silhouette could be seen. It was nimble despite its massive frame, and its four sturdy legs and arched tail were prominently visible even behind the curtain of mist.

“...!”

Kunikida grimaced as if he had been backed into a corner. He seemed to somehow have known that Atsushi and Kyouka were being chased by the beast. His eyes fixed on the thing in front of them, Kunikida observed the creature atop the car’s hood. The broken traffic light next to it had short-circuited, sparking intermittently. Kunikida promptly drew his pistol and pulled the trigger. Three bullets fired, piercing the car’s gas tank to leak gasoline onto the road.

Gasoline has a flash point of approximately negative forty degrees Celsius. Even a spark from static electricity can easily cause it to catch fire. Furthermore, volatilized gasoline vapor has a broad combustion range. Even a weak concentration will burn. If the vapor and sparks

are so much as a foot apart, the former's weight will cause it to sink, thus bringing it into contact with the sparks. And inevitably, this leads to a rapid combustion within the vapor's range.

In other words—an explosion.

Right as Atsushi realized what Kunikida was doing, a spark from the traffic light ignited the gasoline, causing a massive blast. The deafening roar was instantly followed by a bright-orange light and fiery winds. The orange flames and white smoke began spreading.

“Run!” demanded Kunikida as he dashed off with Kyouka in tow. Recoiling from the blast, Atsushi quickly followed them.



A grimy duct curled up the wall and over their heads in the narrow alleyway. The dusty air was stagnant, and there was hardly any light. It was a very gloomy, unwelcoming place. They noisily dashed across the metal floor in order to reach the side door in the back of the alley. Kunikida had Kyouka and Atsushi go first while he kept guard.

“Kunikida, hurry!” urged Atsushi. After all three of them made it inside, they began lowering the steel-bar gate. The passageway was far too narrow for the beast to fit, and the gate's metal bars were too strong for any human to break through. Surely the beast wouldn't be able to catch up with them easily now. Atsushi, probably relieved after hearing the gate click closed, suddenly noticed that Kunikida, who was running behind him, had lost his balance.

“Kunikida!”

He was probably in so much pain that it was hard to even stand. Atsushi immediately ran over and crouched down to meet his eye.

“...” Kyouka, however, ran ahead without saying a word. She appeared to have noticed something.

“Kyouka?”

Atsushi couldn't fathom why she would go on ahead alone, nor did he have any idea what she was thinking. He considered going after her, but he heard Kunikida painfully moan and stopped. She knew what she was doing. Besides, Atsushi trusted her. He knew she would be okay. He was more worried about Kunikida right now.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

It was bizarre to see Kunikida, one of the most gifted members in the agency, injured so severely. Exhausted, Kunikida looked up at Atsushi.

“My skill got me...”

What?

Atsushi's eyes bulged. He couldn't immediately process what he just heard. "Your skill...did that to you?" he whispered, his voice cracking.

All of a sudden, the sealed door behind Kunikida burst to pieces. When Atsushi saw the gleam of a blade, he realized a sword had sliced through the gate.

"...!"

"Kunikida!" gasped Atsushi—not because of what happened to the metal door, which they thought would protect them from any intruder, but because he saw a familiar face on the other side.

...Demon Snow.

It was the masked swordswoman with black hair and dressed in a white kimono. Kyouka's skill was attacking them, and on its forehead was a strange red jewel. Atsushi didn't even have time to scream. Right as Demon Snow appeared, he heard a car slamming on the brakes. When Atsushi looked over, he noticed the last gate up ahead was already open, and there was a car on the other side. A young girl was in the driver's seat, and the door to the passenger side was open.

"Get in!" yelled Kyouka from the driver's seat.

"Atsushi, run!!" screamed Kunikida. There wasn't going to be a second chance.

"...!"

Atsushi reflexively sprinted forward. Kunikida then fired a few more shots at Demon Snow to cover him. Bullets echoed throughout the alley along with the sound of Demon Snow cutting them down. There were so many things to worry about, but Atsushi focused everything he had on running, and he jumped into the car with Kunikida. The instant they shut the car door, Kyouka took off.

And just like that, they sped into the fog at the mercy of the engine. After they disappeared into the distance, Demon Snow merely stared silently in their direction as the red crystal on her forehead glowed eerily.

A single car sped wildly down the streets that night in the empty city frozen in time. Every time they turned a corner, the car would let out an ear-piercing screech and violently shake. Maybe it was because they were pushing the car's speed to the limit. Be that as it may, Kyouka didn't slow down for even a second. Sitting in the passenger seat was Kunikida, applying pressure to the wound on his left side.

"Kunikida," started Atsushi from the back seat, "you said you figured out the mystery behind the serial suicides, right?"

"Those skill users didn't commit suicide," answered Kunikida with a suppressed tone. "They were killed by their own skills."

"..."

"Killed by their own skills." It was so hard to believe that it left Atsushi and Kyouka speechless, but they couldn't deny it. After all, they had just seen Demon Snow a few moments ago. Not only that... the large, ferocious beast that attacked them earlier...

Atsushi decided not to think about it, wanting to believe it wasn't possible.

...Was that the tiger? Atsushi wondered. *Is the tiger trying to kill me?*

After all, Atsushi hadn't been able to use Beast Beneath the Moonlight earlier. Did the tiger somehow separate itself from Atsushi without his knowing? Was that even possible? In the midst of the deep silence, Kunikida ordered, "Let's head to the agency for now."



There was not a single soul inside the redbrick building enshrouded by fog. The Armed Detective Agency was in a terrible state.

"What the...? What happened here?"

Lockers were crushed, furniture and lighting were knocked over, and even a desk was caved in as if someone had hit it. Documents and scraps of paper were scattered about, so there was hardly any space to walk around. Even the conference room, where everyone had gathered only a few days ago, was no different. The long table had been destroyed and knocked over, the chairs were splintered, and the monitor had fallen off the wall. It was a mess. It would be harder to find something intact.

While the battle remains threw Atsushi in a state of

bewilderment...

"To the president's office," urged Kunikida. Atsushi and Kyouka nodded, then began helping their friend, who was bleeding in agony, to their destination. They saw the infirmary on the way with its curtains torn and shelves turned over.

Was there a fight in the infirmary as well? The more they looked, the more they realized just how bad things were here. Atsushi's heart raced. The fact that they still hadn't run into anyone else from the agency made it all the worse. On the bright side, though, they also hadn't found any bodies. Surely their seasoned superiors could take care of themselves. More importantly, they had to focus on what they could do now. Atsushi reassured himself as they rushed to the president's office. As expected, documents and collapsed furniture were scattered about just like in the other rooms. There wasn't even a hint of the office's usual tranquility.

Kunikida suddenly shook Atsushi and Kyouka off him and rushed toward the back of the room where he relentlessly kicked the president's desk out of the way. The thick, mahogany table flipped over.

"Kunikida?!" cried Atsushi in utter astonishment. Kunikida then pulled his detective ID card out of his breast pocket and stuck it into the floor. Upon closer inspection, Atsushi noticed a slot disguised as a grout line between two tiles. When Kunikida slid his card down the slot, it lit up and started making a soft, mechanical noise until the tile completely moved out of the way. Underneath the floor was a complicated-looking piece of electronic equipment. Atsushi had no idea this even existed. Kunikida wasted no time in scanning his palm against the device.

"What is that?" Atsushi asked curiously.

But before Kunikida even responded, a loud noise echoed in the room, and a hidden LCD panel emerged from the wall. Black-and-white static appeared on the highly sophisticated mechanism, and a voice could be heard amid the noise.

"...It looks like it's going to connect."

The static on the display was struggling to take the form of a person. It appeared Kunikida was trying to contact someone. The voice was coming from the other side of the monitor.

"Try to keep this level steady. It appears they won't be able to jam our signal for the time being... Can you hear me?" It sounded as if that last sentence was directed toward this side of the screen. *"Is that you, Mr. Fukuzawa?"*

"It's me, Kunikida," replied Kunikida to the scrambled screen. Perhaps the connection was bad. "I currently don't know the president's whereabouts. I am speaking with the Special Division for

Unusual Powers, correct?"

Special Division for Unusual Powers? Atsushi stared at the screen, surprised by what he heard Kunikida say. The connection must have finally stabilized, as the static disappeared to reveal a scholarly-looking young man wearing glasses.

"Yes, *this is Ango Sakaguchi of the Special Division for Unusual Powers.*" Without even pausing, he continued, "*Kunikida, could you tell me your current situation?*"

"I'm here with Atsushi Nakajima and Kyouka Izumi. The rest of the agency's staff are currently missing."

"I see...," replied Ango in a somewhat dismal tone. "*Our connection isn't stable, so I'll be brief.*" The only light in the president's dark office came from the glow of the monitor. "*The fog phenomenon has appeared in Yokohama. However, no records exist of one this large in scale.*"

The screen suddenly switched to what appeared to be a satellite view of Japan. The monitor gradually zoomed in on the image until it was just a close-up of Kanagawa Prefecture. There was a white fog enveloping the eastern side of the prefecture—Yokohama. Ango's voice continued in the background:

"*The fog has stopped spreading, but just about all of Yokohama is engulfed. The city is currently disconnected from the outside world. Nearly all of Yokohama's inhabitants have gone missing or disappeared. It appears that only skill users are still present, but they—including you—are in grave danger.*"

The screen switched back to Ango's face.

"That corroborates what we've seen here," Kunikida confirmed, his expression stern. "Skills are splitting from their owners and attempting to kill them here as well."



Meanwhile, as Atsushi observed Kunikida and Ango's exchange, violent battles were taking place all throughout Yokohama. On top of a strange, oval-shaped pedestrian bridge were two identical teenage boys facing each other. One was a shadow who was spinning a signpost with such force that it produced a small gale. It was a red stop sign, but it was currently proving to be rather ineffective.

With no means to defend himself, the other freckled teenager, Kenji Miyazawa, jumped off the pedestrian bridge. Fortunately for him, the bridge wasn't too high from the ground, and there were many cars still frozen at the intersection. He landed on top of a car roof, then glared at the shadowy figure who looked just like him as it easily twirled a signpost that weighed several hundred pounds. It was

Kenji's skill, *Undeclared by the Rain*, having split from his body. The skill faced its master with the intent to kill. A red crystal twinkled on its forehead.

Meanwhile, a white mist blocked Junichiro Tanizaki's vision. He cautiously observed his surroundings, but while he was distracted by the illusion, ten delicate fingers wrapped themselves around his neck. The illusion disappeared, revealing a lush green plaza with a fountain and monument. Tanizaki's face twisted in pain as his body was slowly lifted off the ground. The shadowy figure strangling him from behind shared his face. It was his skill, *Light Snow*, with a red crystal on its forehead. Light Snow could produce snowfall and project illusions on said snow, which Tanizaki's opponent used perfectly.

Crossing blades over the stone pavement in the plaza were Yukichi Fukuzawa and his skill, *All Men Are Equal*, a peculiar ability that allowed him to suppress and control his subordinates' skills. Therefore, it did not have any special powers like Kunikida's, Kenji's, or Tanizaki's. Nevertheless, the separated skill was still a mirror image of its owner. In other words, it possessed the same skill set as the man once known as the Silver Wolf. The two of them engaged in a fierce clash under the backdrop of a beautifully symmetrical granite colonnade, shaking the row of ginkgo trees and scraping the stone pavement with every blow they exchanged. The skill, which shared Fukuzawa's form, quickly glided over the ground to create some distance between them. Nevertheless, when it turned back around, it had a red crystal on its forehead just like the other skills. Fukuzawa turned his sword at his opponent once more. The area creaked, and then there was silence. The battle between the Silver Wolves continued at a pace beyond what the average person's eye could keep up with.

Akiko Yosano was facing her own skill, *Thou Shalt Not Die*, which allowed the user to heal external wounds. She swung her trusted hatchet at the woman who looked just like her, and with the help of centrifugal force, the weighty blade sliced off its right arm. The appendage flew into the air before dropping to the ground, but the female figure with a glowing red crystal on its forehead didn't panic. It swiftly leaped back, picked up its arm, and pressed it against its severed limb. There was a bright flash of light as its right arm reconnected to its body. The skill had managed all this in a mere few seconds. The shadowy figure then taunted Yosano with its newly attached arm, causing Yosano's lips to curl into a sneer.

"Yep. This is gonna be tricky," she quietly muttered. The battle

seemed like it would never end. Defeat the skill and win or simply be killed—or wait until the cause had been dealt with.



“Fortunately, we’ve located the skill user behind this phenomenon.” Ango spoke concisely from the other side of the screen on the Armed Detective Agency’s wall. The screen then cut to the same satellite photograph of Yokohama from a few moments ago. A red dot was glowing in the center of the fog. *“He’s in an abandoned high-rise building known as Skull Fortress, located in the middle of the Yokohama Settlement.”*

An eerie jet-black tower appeared on the screen as Ango continued. Something about its numerous intricately carved spires was extremely sinister. With no other tall buildings in its vicinity, it stood alone as if it had scared them all away.

Staring at the screen, Kunikida asked, “So is Tatsuhiko Shibusawa really the one behind this?”

“...!”

Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

Atsushi subtly reacted to the name he remembered hearing during their earlier meeting.

What...?

The name weighed heavily on Atsushi’s mind for reasons that even he did not understand.

“...”

He suddenly visualized a door that he had seen somewhere before. It was a sturdy-looking white door, majestic and divine.

But that door must never be opened. I must never remember what happened.

Atsushi stopped thinking about it and focused on Ango’s voice, oblivious to the fact that Kyouka was looking at him with concern.

Ango continued, *“...I have an important task for your agency.”* The screen was no longer showing the fortress but Ango himself. *“I need you to eliminate Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, the man behind this, by any means necessary.”*

Kyouka narrowed her eyes. “...” She then nodded with a sharp gaze as if she had just figured something out.

“Additionally...,” continued Ango indifferently, *“Dazai appears to be with him.”*

“Dazai’s in the fortress?” said Kunikida. His eyebrow twitched, perhaps out of fear that something bad had happened. The light of the monitor glinted off his glasses. Curious as to why Dazai was in the

fortress, Atsushi suddenly chimed in, “Do you mean he was captured?”

This was Dazai, after all. It was hard to imagine the enemy got the better of him, but the situation was still worrying. Panic crossed Ango’s face for the first time when he heard Atsushi’s question. His reply was impatient:

“Yokohama will be done for at this rate! You are our only hope—”

——Bzzzzzz.

Ango’s voice was cut off and followed by loud static. The screen had returned to a jumbled sandstorm of black and white. Right as Atsushi began to lean forward, an explosion suddenly echoed, and the building shook.

“It’s here...” Kunikida knit his brow. What he experienced in the last hour made it immediately clear to him what was happening: The noise and shaking were caused by a grenade hitting the Armed Detective Agency. The enemy was most likely a tall man wearing glasses with a red crystal on its forehead and holding a notebook that possessed the power to materialize whatever was written in it. It was Kunikida’s skill, *The Matchless Poet*.

This was the same enemy who had injured Kunikida before he ran into Kyouka and Atsushi. He had a good idea how his skill was going to attack, seeing as it was a part of him once. He also knew that, unlike his notebook, the phantom’s notebook had the word *Compromise* written on the cover. A copy of himself that didn’t follow ideals but made compromises was an abomination to Kunikida. That was why he suggested, “You two go on ahead. I’ll take care of him.”

“But, Kunikida...” Atsushi followed after Kunikida as he walked away. “There’s no way you can win against your own skill...”

“It’s not a matter of winning.” Kunikida paused. “What matters is whether you should fight.”

“...!”

Atsushi stopped in his tracks and lowered his gaze. Kunikida then firmly stated, “I will prevail against myself...just like I always have.” And with that declaration, he knocked on the wall next to Fukuzawa’s hanging scroll that had HEAVEN DOES NOT CREATE ONE MAN ABOVE ANOTHER written on it. The scroll then shook before a hidden shelf swiftly descended from the ceiling. Lying on the shelves were several firearms.

“What are these...?” muttered Atsushi in bewilderment as he looked at the weapons.

“We are an *armed* detective agency, you know,” Kunikida replied confidently. After picking up a handgun and a machine gun, he skillfully loaded them. There was a hard, metallic clink.

“Take these.”

He handed Atsushi and Kyouka each a gun, but Kyouka insisted

right away that she didn't need it, leaving only Atsushi with a firearm. He couldn't hide his reluctance about holding the cold, heavy weapon. While rummaging for a weapon of his own, Kunikida revealed, "My skill can't create a weapon bigger than its notebook." He grabbed a weapon as if he had made up his mind. "Use the back door to escape while I distract it."

Kunikida had chosen a Remington M870 pump-action shotgun, which was over three feet long. He loaded it up, then pulled back on the fore-end so he would be ready to shoot at any given moment. The shotgun gave an imposing click.

"Hurry!"

"...!"

Atsushi and Kyouka sprinted out of the room, urged on by Kunikida's shout.



Around the time Atsushi and Kyouka were escaping the Armed Detective Agency, Ango Sakaguchi was clenching his fist. The room was dark. Numerous people wearing suits faced the countless ever-changing monitors and worked at their desks. Hurried voices mixed with the sound of busy keyboards.

This was the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

Ango stood up from the command chair. The signal had just cut off during his conversation with Doppo Kunikida at the Armed Detective Agency. There was no chance they would be able to reconnect the call, so he gave up and asked one of his agents, "Have you pinpointed skill user A5158's location yet?"

"I have," they replied.

"Then could you give him a message?"

"What would you like me to tell him?"

Ango quietly stared at the image of fog covering Yokohama. They were out of time. With a hint of desperation in his voice, he responded:

"...It's time to pay Professor Glasses back."



After getting back in the car, Atsushi and Kyouka began driving off when they heard explosions in the background.

"Kunikida!"

Atsushi looked back from the passenger seat and saw smoke rising from the brick building. It was coming from the fourth floor where the

agency was located. The darkness of night glittered with flames. Was Kunikida all right? Regardless, they couldn't head back to the agency. They just had to believe in him.

"...I hope Kunikida's okay," Atsushi muttered weakly. Kyouka, on the other hand, was not even fazed by the explosions as she drove.

"What we need to focus on now is eliminating Tatsuhiko Shibusawa," she said.

"Tatsuhiko Shibusawa...," repeated Atsushi in a daze. There was something about Shibusawa that had been strangely bothering him ever since he first heard his name in the conference room. "I wonder what he's like..."

Kyouka shot Atsushi a quizzical glance before Atsushi continued, "You say we need to eliminate him, but...it doesn't matter how evil he is. There's no reason to kill him. We just need to capture him."

Atsushi racked his brain for a solution in an attempt to escape from his own fears. Eventually, the image of a sand-colored overcoat popped into his head, reminding him of the man he owed everything to.

"That's it!" Atsushi looked to Kyouka. "I'll bet Dazai will know what to do. We just need to save him."

He mumbled to himself in an act of desperation, trying to convince himself of those words:

"Yeah. Dazai has to know what to do. Once we save him, he'll..."

"..."

But Kyouka didn't respond, and Atsushi never even noticed the ice-cold look in her eyes.

Interlude 2—1

A bell could be heard in the distance. The pale moon illuminated the mist circulating through the pitch-black night. It was as if a sea of fog had consumed the world with no horizon in sight. The black tower pierced the clouds as it stretched to the moon. Gentle curves and countless sharp spires intertwined around the fortress in the center as if holding it upright. The ornaments on the tower's facade were exquisitely intricate, to the point of obsession even, and emitted a vaguely ominous aura. To some, they truly looked like human bones.

A party was about to begin in the sinister tower.

“Dazai.”

A voice called out to Dazai from behind as he gazed down at the city from the glass wall on the top floor. The sound of footsteps approached until a man with crimson eyes and white hair appeared. It was Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

“Are you not bored of looking at that?” he asked Dazai.

“...Bored?” repeated Dazai, his expression faded.

Shibusawa nodded. “I know I certainly am,” he replied.

There was a skull on display on the table between them for some reason. Brilliant-red apples surrounded it as if to add some life to it. Two of the apples were pierced with knives even though there had been just one knife only seconds ago.

Shibusawa slowly approached the table and said in almost a whisper, “A sea of ivory and nothingness...a nondescript world full of coarseness.” He turned his gaze toward the table's surface. “Tonight, all the skills in Yokohama will become mine.” He spoke of his prediction with a dull tone, as if it were fact. “Yet again, it appears no one will be capable of outsmarting me or defying my expectations... How truly boring.”

“I used to be bored just like you,” answered Dazai while he gazed out the window.

“How did you overcome it?”

“It'd be quicker to show you.”

Dazai finally turned around and faced Shibusawa before approaching the table. He then leisurely took a seat in one of the three chairs. Shibusawa simply watched him without saying a word.

“See? You don't even know my true intentions right now,” Dazai calmly claimed. “You don't know whether I'm helping you or using

you.”

Dazai’s eyes weren’t focused on Shibusawa, and it was impossible to infer from his voice how he really felt. Nevertheless, Shibusawa smirked at the taunts and replied, “You’re the only one who thinks your intentions are unknowable.”

Dazai slowly lowered his gaze. “I guess you really do need salvation.”

“And who can save me?” Shibusawa snorted softly.

“Hmm... Maybe an angel?” Dazai picked up the skull on the table. “Or maybe a demon?”

There was a diagonal cut across the skull’s cheekbone, and another knife had unnoticeably appeared, piercing a third apple. At the same time, another voice suddenly joined in on their conversation.

“It’s obvious what both of your true intentions are, if you ask me.” The third man mirthfully cackled and took the skull from Dazai’s hand. “You cannot write a play with such lies. It would shatter the audience’s immersion.”

He brushed back his warm-looking mantle as his boots clicked against the floor. The earflaps of his *ushanka* fluttered with each step until he stopped to regard Dazai and Shibusawa with his violet eyes, which were almost hidden under his black hair.

“Fyodor the Conjuror...,” Shibusawa warmly welcomed the third man. “You shall dance for me as well...as my collaborator.”

“Him? Help you?” Dazai said with a chuckle. “He’s the one mostly likely to betray you.”

“I can’t deny that,” Fyodor himself agreed delightfully before comfortably taking a seat. Shibusawa thereupon drew a chair for himself. His expression was calm and brimming with confidence. “No one has ever exceeded my expectations... I anticipate great things from you.”

Each of their goals and intentions crossed paths, but there was still no way of knowing who would be able to fulfill their objective. In fact, nobody even knew what the three of them were after.

“Of course,” said Fyodor almost in singsong manner, “it’s this city’s skill users that I feel most sorry for.” His frigid smile was reminiscent of the heart of winter. “Because no matter which one of us three prevails, they will all perish.”

Defeated
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

The
Matchless
Poet

Super
Deduction

Demon
Snow

Kashomon

CHAPTER III

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

All
Men
Are
Equal

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

3—1

“What if our skills never come back...?” muttered Atsushi with a sigh. He was still in the passenger seat while Kyouka was driving. Not much time had gone by since they left Kunikida at the Armed Detective Agency. The car raced through the dense fog as it passed through Chinatown. The tires screeched with each speedy turn.

“Are you sure it’s okay to drive so fast in this fog?” asked Atsushi, slightly nervous.

“I know Yokohama like the back of my hand,” Kyouka calmly replied. “That has nothing to do with my skills as an assassin or with my ability. I plan on getting as far away as I can before Demon Snow catches up.”

I know she’s trying to tell me that she’s still perfectly smart and capable even without her ability, but I made her talk about something she doesn’t want to. Kyouka hates the assassin she used to be.

Atsushi painfully lowered his gaze, feeling guilty about what he asked. When he looked down, though, he couldn’t think of anything positive. He was simply reminded of the present situation and what has become of his skill, so he let out an inward sigh.

“...When I first learned that my skill turned me into a tiger and made me lose control, I wished I’d never had such a power...,” he muttered in a self-deprecating manner. “But I never imagined that tiger would come for me.”

He idly gazed at Kyouka until she looked straight ahead, her eyes indicating she was ready for whatever happened. Unlike Atsushi, she wasn’t bothered.

“Demon Snow killed my parents. I’ve never considered her an ally,” Kyouka replied firmly. “If she’s going to attack me, then I’m simply going to dispose of her.”

Out of nowhere, they heard a thud on the car’s roof, and Atsushi began to tremble.

“She’s here.” When Kyouka quietly looked up, a sword immediately pierced through the roof.

“Whoa—?!” Atsushi managed to dodge the blade before it sank into his seat. It was a familiar sword—it clearly belonged to Demon Snow. The skill must have jumped onto the car’s roof. Kyouka aggressively turned the steering wheel in an attempt to throw Demon Snow off, but the skill’s sword punctured the roof once more. It was after Kyouka now. Kyouka dodged the blade as it impaled the driver’s seat. Thankfully, although only for a brief moment, Demon Snow needed some time to pull out her sword, which Kyouka promptly took advantage of. She grabbed Atsushi by the collar and jumped out of the car. Atsushi yelped as he was tossed out onto the street, and his body slammed against the pavement. Now driverless, the car spun out of control and crashed into an electric pole before immediately exploding. The whipping winds conjured a dust cloud.

Atsushi curled into a ball to protect himself from the impact and blast wave. Kyouka, however, nimbly landed before swiftly pulling out her dagger. She fixed her gaze up ahead where Demon Snow dispersed the cloud of dust only using its sword. The explosion didn’t seem to have left so much as a scratch on the disembodied skill. Demon Snow raced toward Kyouka, but Kyouka deflected the attack with her dagger. They went back and forth, attacking and defending each other’s strikes.

Atsushi took out the gun that Kunikida gave him and pointed it at the skill with a trembling hand, but...he misfired. There was a click as if something had gotten stuck.

“Oh, the safety...,” muttered Atsushi as he fiddled with the gun in a panic. The safety was off; that was why the gun hadn’t fired. Atsushi was at a loss. He wasn’t used to handling a gun. *I have to hurry*, he thought, when all of a sudden...

“Go!” yelled Kyouka at Atsushi as she was locking blades with Demon Snow. “Now!”

“...!!”

But when Atsushi looked up, it appeared Kyouka was being pushed back. It was only a matter of time before she would get hurt.

I have to do something!

“Ahhhhhhh!” Atsushi let out a powerful cry and charged forward. All he could think about was saving Kyouka.

I have to... I have to do something, or...!

But right as Atsushi raised his gun once more...

A black shadow shot across his field of vision and rammed into Demon Snow.

What the...?! Atsushi was bewildered.

The shadow collapsed onto the ground. Since Demon Snow was

knocked back, Kyouka had a moment to get out of the way and regain her footing. The black shadow had saved her. But was that intentional?

To Atsushi, it merely looked like something had launched the black shadow in this direction, and it just happened to slam into Demon Snow.

I still can't let my guard down.

Atsushi aimed the barrel of his gun at the black shadow and held his breath. The shadow—a short individual wrapped in a black overcoat—stirred.

Don't tell me that's...

Atsushi's eyes opened wide. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Here? Now? Like this? He couldn't believe it was *him*. It was hard to believe this was reality.

The lump of black fabric turned his piercing gaze to Atsushi.

"You... Akutagawa!" Atsushi said his name almost in a daze.

The Devil of Darkness... The Hunting Dog... Port Mafia's Hellhound...

...Akutagawa.

He was Atsushi's enemy, someone who regarded him with even more hostility.

"...You two? Hmph." Akutagawa, covered in dirt, resentfully clicked his tongue and glared at them.

It doesn't matter why he's here. I just need to be the first to strike.

Atsushi removed the safety this time and pointed his gun at Akutagawa. But the Hellhound appeared unbothered as he got back to his feet.

"A flimsy weapon, but..." Akutagawa looked in the direction he came. "A peashooter like that isn't going to work against that."

"That?"

Atsushi dubiously followed Akutagawa's gaze to where he saw a shadowy figure, entirely wrapped in what appeared to be black bandages, walking through the fog. The bandages faintly wriggled as if they were alive. Just like the one on Demon Snow's forehead, a glimmering red crystal on its stomach peeked out from between two bandages. Atsushi instinctively knew what "that" was the moment he saw it. It was Akutagawa's skill—*Rashomon*.

Even Akutagawa's being attacked by his separated skill! That must've been what knocked him into Demon Snow.

Atsushi suddenly heard a roar from behind. It was a beast with beautiful white fur and a limber body—the tiger. As expected, there was a red crystal on its forehead as well, gleaming with hostility.

The approaching tiger was Atsushi's skill, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*.

...So the strange creature that attacked us really was the tiger.

Atsushi painfully regarded the beast.

Demon Snow. Rashomon. The tiger.

A cold sweat dripped down Atsushi's body as he found himself surrounded by three skills that were exceptionally powerful.

This isn't good...

Atsushi gripped his gun. Rashomon's movement was unnatural despite its humanoid form. As it leaped into the air, the black fabric stretched into a blade. Akutagawa braced himself.

However...

Rashomon didn't attack Akutagawa, but the tiger.

The tiger bared its fangs and threw itself at Rashomon as well. Rashomon's black fabric and the tiger's claws clashed. They engaged in a fierce battle as if they had just come across their sworn enemy. It appeared that they didn't get along even as disembodied skills.

"Interesting." Akutagawa's lips curled with great amusement. "Want to see which is stronger?"

"This is no time for jokes!" Atsushi couldn't stop himself from shouting.

There was no way an ordinary human could take on Rashomon and the tiger, given their speed, strength, and power. Demon Snow was still there as well. They were backed into a corner. To make matters worse, Demon Snow began to dash right for them while Rashomon and the tiger were fighting.

What should we do?

While Atsushi hesitated, Kyouka intercepted Demon Snow's sword. Locking blades, she calmly said to Akutagawa, "There should be a secret passage nearby that only the top-ranking members of the Port Mafia can use."



“Hmph...” Akutagawa knit his brow reluctantly, then barked at Atsushi, “This way. Come, Man-Tiger.”

The Mafia’s secret passage? Atsushi was hesitant. Akutagawa, however, swiftly turned around and began to walk away.

Does he want me to follow him? But Kyouka’s still fighting.

“Hey!” Atsushi yelled at Akutagawa.

Kyouka seemed to have realized that Atsushi was trying to stop him, so she sternly demanded, “Go!” Atsushi and Kyouka locked eyes. “I’ll be there soon, I promise!”

Her eyes were the epitome of serious, and they wouldn’t take no for an answer. She was being genuine when she said she was planning on catching up with them later.

“...All right.”

Although hesitant, Atsushi decided to believe in Kyouka, and he rushed after Akutagawa.

Akutagawa ended up entering some run-of-the-mill Chinese restaurant, the kind found throughout the city. It was a small establishment with a few tables lined up near the counter. The edges of the menu plastered on the wall had turned brown from age. There were woks and dishes chaotically stacked up in the kitchen, but otherwise, the restaurant was relatively clean.

What's Akutagawa doing in such an ordinary restaurant? And why'd I even have to go with him?

Although bewildered, Atsushi followed Akutagawa into the kitchen. Then, without even a moment of hesitation, Akutagawa grabbed a knife by the sink and started hacking away at the wall. Each time he swung the knife, he almost cut Atsushi, who was standing behind him.

What is he doing?!

Ignoring Atsushi's startled reaction, he hit the wall once more, but a portion of it crumbled, revealing a hidden, narrow slit. He then took the same knife and jabbed it into the opening. *Clang!* A mechanical sound began to creak as if two large gears were moving. *Pssshhh.* The wall before Akutagawa opened.

A hidden door? Atsushi thought while staring at the knife in the wall and the uncovered passage. So this was the mafia's hidden passage that Kyouka was talking about. It really was cleverly hidden. Atsushi would have never found it on his own. But in the midst of his surprise, he suddenly heard an ear-piercing crash at the entranceway behind him. When he turned around, Kyouka had kicked in the door and was rushing inside.

"Kyouka!"

Behind her was Demon Snow. Kyouka leaped over the counter and sprinted toward Atsushi and Akutagawa. Atsushi then ran to the other side of the wall with Akutagawa, and they waited for her. Demon Snow, however, immediately flew into the restaurant, swinging her sword. After Kyouka ran to the other side of the hidden door, it began to close along with the sound of tableware shattering until it completely shut...only moments before Demon Snow's blade reached her.

We made it...

When Atsushi let out a sigh of relief, the room instantly started to move.



The room on the other side of the hidden door was actually an elevator. It was as spacious as a service elevator and far drearier. The wires visible under the metal mesh floor made it clear they were slowly heading underground. The orange lighting reflected off the metal walls, and the mechanical operation noises continued to roar.

"This is an emergency passage in case a powerful skill user attacks," said Akutagawa. "The fog will not be able to reach us here."

Atsushi glanced at Akutagawa. "Just what is that fog?"

"...The breath of the dragon."

"Dragon?" Atsushi furrowed his brow, caught off guard by the reply.

What does that even mean? A dragon...?

Before Atsushi could ask him to clarify, Akutagawa said, "Kyouka...with your assassination skills, you could easily kill me, now that neither of us has our abilities."

"..."

But Kyouka didn't reply to his taunts, and Akutagawa smirked at her expressionless face.

"What's wrong? I thought you wanted to cut ties with me once and for all."

"Kyouka doesn't care about you anymore!" Atsushi promptly butted in, annoyed. He turned around and was met with Akutagawa's cold gaze. He looked positively murderous.

I knew he couldn't be trusted. He's still our enemy, Atsushi thought while glaring at Akutagawa. Akutagawa regarded Atsushi as if he were the most foolish creature on earth.

"...Are you sure you want to settle things now while we don't have our skills?"

It was as if he was implying that they should wait until they got their skills back.

Wait. Does he know—?

Kyouka suddenly turned around and asked the question that came to Atsushi's mind:

"Do you know how to get our skills back?"

Akutagawa nodded. "I do."

"What?" Atsushi gasped. All three faced one another.

"The skill will return to its user once defeated," Akutagawa explained indifferently before he gave a snort. "You didn't even know that?"

"...!"

It was the first Atsushi heard of it. So a skill user could get their

skill back by defeating it... Kunikida probably wasn't aware of that, either.

He may have said this simply to make fools of Atsushi and Kyouka, but Akutagawa had easily offered this bit of information. Atsushi braced himself, preparing for whatever Akutagawa was plotting.

"...What's your goal here?" he demanded of Akutagawa.

"It's probably the same as ours," Kyouka said softly.

"No way..." After glancing in Kyouka's direction, Atsushi turned his gaze back toward Akutagawa. "You're after Shibusawa?"

"I plan on pulling out his entrails and ending his life," answered Akutagawa. "Is there any other way to save Yokohama?"

"We're not going to kill him," Atsushi replied promptly. "That's not what the agency does." He didn't want to be anything like Akutagawa.

Akutagawa scoffed. "Absurd. You're naive, Man-Tiger... Kyouka, tell him."

"...What are you talking about?" Atsushi furrowed his brow as Akutagawa cynically smirked. Akutagawa then pointed at Kyouka with his chin with even greater amusement.

"Kyouka knows what this mission entails. She used to be in the Port Mafia, after all."

What's that supposed to mean? Atsushi quietly stared at Kyouka, who was glaring at Akutagawa with a dark scowl.

"I left the darkness for the light," she stated. "I quit the Port Mafia to join the detective agency." She continued with a firm, determined tone, "...The agency and the Mafia don't kill in the same way."

...Huh? thought Atsushi. *Kill?*

Is Kyouka planning on killing Shibusawa?

But why? Since when? That's...

Atsushi was unable to put his thoughts into words.

"Kyouka?" he squeaked.

Then, it was as if Akutagawa's cruel voice echoed inside of Atsushi's befuddled mind:

"Had all this happened before Dazai joined the enemy, he probably could have used his own skill to stop the fog without having to kill anyone."

"Joined the enemy? Dazai...?"

Atsushi couldn't hide his confusion.

He couldn't believe it. It had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

That just wasn't possible.

But Akutagawa's expression didn't change.

"Indeed..." Akutagawa turned his gaze toward Atsushi. "He voluntarily joined their side."

"Dazai would never do such a thing!" Atsushi yelled instinctively.

"This is the same man who once betrayed the Port Mafia," Akutagawa replied calmly.

It was obvious that he truly believed what he was saying. Akutagawa was convinced that Dazai had now betrayed the agency. He apparently knew something that they didn't. Ango Sakaguchi had also mentioned that Dazai was with Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

He didn't mean that Dazai was captured? Then...

"...!"

Atsushi was speechless. He still couldn't believe it.

"I will be the one to kill Dazai," Akutagawa announced coldly.

His eyes glowed with firm determination. They were frighteningly sharp as they pierced Atsushi. Overwhelmed, Atsushi felt as if he were being crushed by his gaze, and he unconsciously looked away. Atsushi then asked:

"...Do you seriously think you can kill him?"

Not a chance in hell, Atsushi thought. Akutagawa was terribly obsessed with Dazai, after all—almost abnormally so. Atsushi was convinced he wouldn't be able to kill the man. But Akutagawa's eyes were still burning with obsession when he hissed, "Better that he dies by my hand than by someone else's."

"...!"

A chill shot down Atsushi's spine. That was a very Akutagawa way of thinking. If this man said he was going to do something, he would surely do it. That was enough for him to dispose of Dazai. Nonetheless, Atsushi would never allow it.

"I won't let you kill Dazai!"

He had lifted his gun and pointed it at Akutagawa when the elevator finally came to a stop. The door equipped with various complicated mechanisms opened, revealing an underground passage with countless ducts on each side. Akutagawa got off the elevator without even saying a word to Atsushi. His heavy steps echoed down the dark path. With his gun still pointing at Akutagawa's back, Atsushi told him, "We can't go with you."

The door to the elevator began to close once more, but right before Akutagawa disappeared from sight, Kyouka grabbed the door and stopped it.

"We're going with him," she said shortly.

"What?!"

Interlude 2—2

On the highest floor of Skull Fortress, Shibusawa slightly smirked before the other two men present. They were in a dark passageway located even deeper than the room decorated with apples that were pierced with knives and the countless tall windows that extended to the ceiling.

“Welcome to my collection room—Draconia.”

Shibusawa was holding an ominous skull. Amid the darkness was a structure that emitted a pale glow. It was semicircular, like a circus tent or a giant conservatory, with a door in the shape of a coiled dragon. In its hand was a red jewel.

The door opened, welcoming Dazai and Fyodor to Shibusawa’s so-called collection room, Draconia.

In the center was a pedestal-like pillar surrounded by display shelves attached to the wall. It was 360 degrees of shelves, and displayed on them were red crystals. The second level of the collection room was no different. Hundreds—thousands—of crystals decorated the shelves.

“Each one of these is a skill, huh?” Dazai muttered coldly as he looked at the wall. “That’s a huge collection you got yourself.”

“Marvelous. Even the devil himself would be envious.” Fyodor smirked, then leaned into Dazai and whispered, “The crystals started clamoring ever since you set foot in the room.”

But Shibusawa only reacted to Fyodor’s first comment. Perhaps he hadn’t heard the second part—or he simply didn’t care.

“Then I guess that makes you the rat of death, here to sell information to the devil.”

Shibusawa regarded Fyodor.

“I found half of this collection thanks to the information I bought from you about skill users. That allowed me to create a fog large enough to swallow an entire city.”

Skill users who came in contact with the fog were split from their skills, which then attacked them. If they managed to defeat their skill, then they would get their skill back. However, what would happen if they lost? One look inside Draconia could answer that. They would be killed by their skills, which would then turn into a crystal, only to be collected by Shibusawa. The red crystals on the skills’ foreheads were proof that they had become a part of his collection.

Little did Atsushi and the others know that the fire-wielding skill

user in Taipei who was burned to death, the card-wielding assassin crucified in Singapore, and the ice wielder skewered in Detroit were all people who Shibusawa robbed skills from. Their skills had surely turned into crystals and added to the collection just like the rest. Shibusawa was only able to subjugate all of Yokohama because he had gathered so many skills in the form of crystals. So he was thankful to an extent to Fyodor, who had supplied him with information.

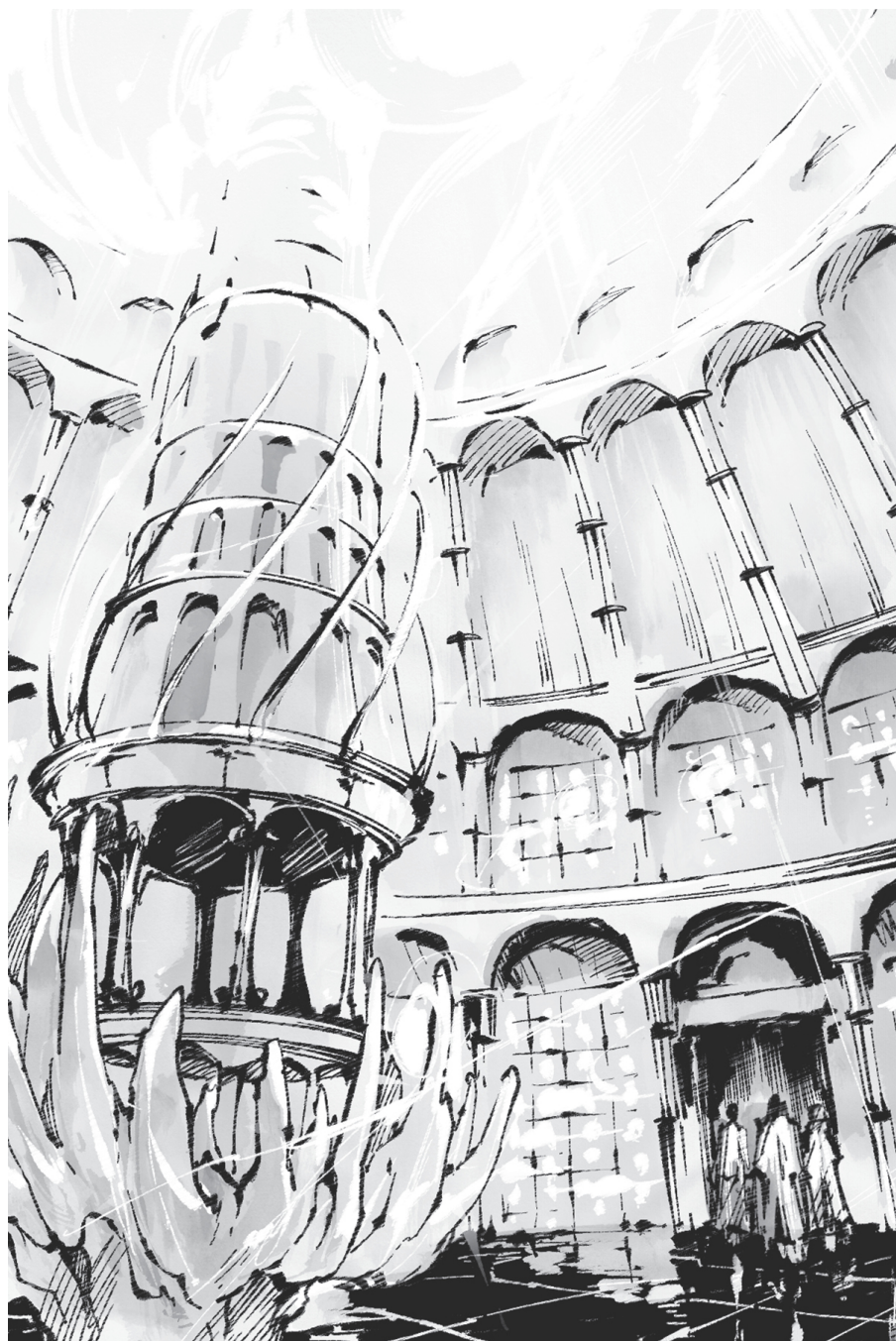
“However...” As if he was testing Fyodor, Shibusawa asked, “How were you able to gather so much information?”

“The city is full of rats.”

After Fyodor shrugged and dodged the question, Dazai muttered a tedious “*Meow.*”

An empty space on the shelf behind him suddenly illuminated. The light grew stronger and more condensed until it eventually transformed into a red crystal that spun as it filled in the void.

“We have a new arrival.” Shibusawa took notice of the new crystal. “Somewhere in Yokohama, another skill user has died. However...”



There was no warmth in Shibusawa's indifferent tone. He barely glanced at the new crystal before immediately returning his gaze to the pedestal in the center of the room.

"This is all pointless without that one skill that fits right here." Shibusawa placed a hand on top of the empty pedestal and whispered, "It doesn't matter how many I collect, unless..."

His voice was slowly swallowed by the void until it could be heard no more.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

The sound of metal echoed as Atsushi and Kyouka followed Akutagawa. Kyouka had managed to coerce Atsushi into cooperating with his sworn enemy.

At the end of the underground passage was a large, open space. All the ducts they had seen along the passageway led to a room filled with various containers and machinery. It appeared to be some sort of underground factory.

“Kyouka,” groaned Atsushi while walking. “Why are we following him?”

“Because he has information...and we can use the Port Mafia’s secret passage,” replied Kyouka in a matter-of-fact tone. “And most importantly, he’ll be a powerful asset in battle once he gets his skill back. Our goal is the same: Eliminate Shibusawa.”

She made a sound argument. It was evident from her logical tone and unchanging expression that she had rationally evaluated the situation. That didn’t mean Atsushi was happy about it.

“But...” He instinctively began to dispute it, but he didn’t have any convincing counterarguments that could change Kyouka’s mind. Atsushi simply lowered his gaze, unable to find the right words.

“Kyouka.” Akutagawa, who was walking ahead of the others alone, spoke up. “I see you still cherish that cell phone to remember your mother.”

He had his eye on an old cell phone dangling from her neck like a piece of jewelry. However, there was something about his comment that particularly stood out to Atsushi.

“Your mother...?” That was the first he’d ever heard of it. Surprised, Atsushi came to a halt.

That cell phone Kyouka always carries around with her is a memento? But why does Akutagawa know that?

Atsushi’s mind was full of questions. He couldn’t even look at Kyouka.

Akutagawa stopped. “You didn’t even know that?” he mockingly asked.

“...No,” Atsushi quietly replied. As if to change the subject, Kyouka suddenly asked Akutagawa, “What’s the quickest route?”

“Zero, five, zero, five,” he answered immediately. It must have been some sort of secret code that only the Port Mafia knew, and

naturally, Atsushi had no idea what it was. While Kyouka probably didn't mean anything by it...Atsushi felt left out of the conversation—left out in general.

“...”

Atsushi silently pressed forward, feeling almost as though he didn't belong.



After stepping into the sewer from the narrow passageway, the three of them kept their mouths shut tight while trudging through the vile sewage and water until eventually reaching a manhole leading to the surface. A few rats scattered as Akutagawa removed the manhole cover. When he stepped outside, he could just make out a colossal building covered in countless thick pipes and metal with various chimneys blowing out white smoke. It appeared to be some sort of iron mill. Kyouka and Akutagawa cautiously surveyed the area while Atsushi came crawling out of the manhole as well.

All of a sudden, Akutagawa stared fixedly at the factory as if he had noticed something.

“It appears to be waiting for me. I suppose it's only natural that it can sense my presence,” Akutagawa muttered to himself. Wondering what he meant, Atsushi followed his gaze, when he noticed it as well.

Rashomon.

Akutagawa's skill looked down at them, its black fabric wriggling. Or more accurately, it was looking down at Akutagawa.

So this is what he was talking about, thought Atsushi. Seems like skills can sense where their owners are. There's no other explanation for why it's already here.

While Atsushi was pondering this, Kyouka told Akutagawa, “We'll help.”

Even though the circumstances were dire, it was still surprising to hear Kyouka offer him help. Nevertheless, Akutagawa barked back, “I don't need your help!”

“I see.” Kyouka seemed to be more indifferent to the situation than Atsushi thought. Akutagawa then began to walk toward Rashomon without them. Atsushi could hear him mutter to himself, “...I've wandered countless nights and slaughtered countless foes to prove my might. But I was blind—the foe worthiest of defeating was right beside me the entire time...”

Akutagawa slowly vanished within the fog.

He still wants to prove his strength even at a time like this?

Atsushi sighed.

Plus, it's really thoughtless of him to go off on his own.

Kyouka, on the other hand, nodded in agreement with Akutagawa's decision.

"He has a point." She turned her gaze in the opposite direction that Akutagawa left in. "We each have something that needs doing."

"Huh?"

Atsushi noticed Demon Snow descending before Kyouka.

How long has she been there?!

Atsushi reached for his gun and braced himself. Kyouka drew her dagger, then threw the sheath onto the ground with a dry, hollow clatter. Without even waiting for Demon Snow to strike, Kyouka crouched low, charged forward, and attacked. The skill blocked her blade and parried. However, Kyouka predicted that would happen and used the momentum to swing her sword at a different angle next.

"Kyouka!"

Atsushi tried to rush over to help, but Kyouka bluntly objected. "Do what you need to be doing."

"...!"

What's that supposed to mean? No—don't tell me...!

Atsushi began trembling. Rashomon was waiting for Akutagawa, and Demon Snow had come after Kyouka as well. Which meant...

The low snarl of a beast caught his attention. He swiftly turned around—it was just as he imagined. The snowy-white tiger, Beast Beneath the Moonlight, had arrived.

...The tiger's here for me, too.

If Akutagawa was right, and skills could sense where their users were, then there was no point in running. No matter where he went, it would eventually catch up to him. Atsushi clenched his jaw.

Interlude 2—3

“Humans are nothing more than sacks of flesh stuffed with familiar machinery,” Shibusawa suddenly said from within the collection room decorated with its many red crystals. “They are all self-evident, monotonous creatures.”

Dazai and Fyodor quietly listened to his speech.

“But there’s one person even I fail to understand.” Shibusawa suddenly stopped strolling around the room as if he were scrutinizing his collection. “Myself,” he claimed with a straight face.

“Even I cannot decipher my own thoughts—some parts of my mind are blank, like the spaces between lines of text in a novel.”

“Do you have any friends?” asked Dazai, the exasperation on his face evident.

“Friends are unnecessary to life.” Shibusawa closed his eyes and smiled languidly. “Because I already know what everyone is thinking deep down.” He turned and faced Dazai and Fyodor, who were standing side by side. “I will surely be able to go between my lines, beyond the light of empty spaces where another world awaits.” His words were dripping with confidence.

“...You wouldn’t be saying that if you had friends,” Dazai mumbled, unamused.

Shibusawa paid no heed to Dazai’s utterance and instead continued: “That time will soon come, for all the skills in Yokohama will become mine.”

Everything was going to go according to plan. There was no other possible outcome. The reasoning was simple.

Shibusawa walked to the center of Draconia with an air of authority and peered at Dazai. Smirking contemptuously, he whispered:

“Do you truly think there is even a single person who can conquer their own skill?”

The burning flames roared. Melted iron glowed orange, and the air around it wavered in the heat. Inside the blast furnace deep within the factory Atsushi previously saw was a colossal crane hanging over four bridge-like paths connected like a grid. Rashomon leisurely strolled down the paths supported by sturdy pillars over the vat of molten iron. Waiting for his skill to get closer, Akutagawa said, “Rashomon attacks by turning its fabric into blades and swinging them at an opponent. Therefore, as long as I stay out of reach, I will not get hit.”

There was no way Akutagawa would mistake how far Rashomon’s range was. After all, he had been restlessly honing his skill ever since he could only create tiny blades with it. The reason it was as powerful and had such a range as it did now was because of his efforts, so he was confident he knew exactly what Rashomon was capable of. He watched Rashomon approach with a hand on a pillar’s switchboard until the time was just right. Akutagawa immediately pushed the button, causing a pulley attached to the ceiling to rotate as something loudly echoed. The pulley began quickly spinning as a block of iron rapidly dropped toward Rashomon’s head. The powerful impact sent dust flying into the air, making it impossible to see Rashomon...for a moment.

“...!”

Akutagawa gasped as Rashomon attacked from above. Right before the crane hit him, Rashomon used its fabric to launch itself out of the way to safety. It had even used the cloud of dust as a smoke screen to approach Akutagawa, who scowled bitterly, knowing just how dangerous it was to get close to Rashomon. He dodged, and immediately a black blade quickly shot through where he was standing. He began to run as the fabric swiftly carved through the thick pillar. There was no hesitation or mercy behind the attack, and the blade would only need to lightly touch him to be fatal. It was no different from how Akutagawa always fought. Akutagawa sprinted, and Rashomon chased after him. It was going to be over soon. The panic on Akutagawa’s expression was evident. It wasn’t long before Rashomon swiftly caught up with him, using its black fabric. Akutagawa had nowhere left to run except for one of the bridges over the vat of molten iron. His shoes sharply clinked over the metal with each step as he ran.

Whoosh! Crack!

Rashomon's black fabric soared through the air before slicing through the bridge's handrails. It immediately turned and went for Akutagawa next, but he managed to dodge, albeit barely...or so he thought. He suddenly lost balance and promptly grabbed for the handrail for support, but it had already been destroyed by Rashomon. There was nothing to grab onto. The skill was trying to make Akutagawa fall into the molten iron. It had destroyed the handrails and brandished its blade in order to corner Akutagawa and kill him even if he dodged.

"Shit!" Akutagawa blurted out.

His small figure was tossed into the pit of molten iron.



While Akutagawa was dealing with Rashomon, Atsushi was battling his own skill.

Atsushi ran down the narrow passageway with its numerous ducts on each side until he came to a sudden stop, then turned around and fired his gun. The sound of gunshots echoed as the bullet ricocheted off the wall.

...Looks like the tiger dodged it.

Atsushi glared at the beast in frustration, and it raised its tail with an intimidating roar. Figuring the tiger wouldn't be able to dodge from this close, Atsushi pulled the trigger once more. The bullet spun out of the barrel while heading straight for the tiger, but its white fur deflected each bullet sent its way.

"...!"

The tiger then leaned back before lunging at Atsushi. *Slash.* Its claws grazed Atsushi's left arm.

...Should I complain that I got hurt even though I dodged, or should I be thankful that it's only a scratch? ...Definitely the latter.

After thinking about it, Atsushi couldn't remember a time where a bullet hurt him while he was in his tiger form. In other words, bullets weren't going to work.

"How do I beat this thing...?"

Atsushi racked his brain as he watched the tiger nimbly land on its feet. That was when the red crystal glittering on the beast's forehead caught his attention.

"...Do I just need to get rid of that...?"

While unclear if it would actually work, it was the only solution he could think of. He didn't have any other options. Atsushi steeled himself as he stared fixedly at the beast.

But how would I even hit it?

Atsushi pointed the muzzle at the tiger's forehead as it bared its fangs. The first shot missed. He went for a second, third, and fourth shot as well. *Click*. Nothing happened. He was out of bullets.

Damn it!

Atsushi didn't have any other weapons.

I should've brought more guns with me from the agency!

But it was too late for regrets. Atsushi threw the gun at the tiger in desperation, but it simply slid down the path after a few light bounces, never to reach the beast.

What am I supposed to do?

Blood trickled down Atsushi's left arm where the claws had sliced his flesh. The pain had him drenched in a cold sweat, and the tiger was waiting in front of him with its mouth open.

Feeble words sluggishly left Atsushi's throat:

"There's no way I can defeat my skill..."



All over Yokohama, people were slowly being backed into a corner by their skills.

On a street littered with driverless cars, Kenji Miyazawa was being toyed with by his skill. The skill used its overwhelming strength to launch vehicles at him. All Kenji could do was dodge one after another as they threatened to crush him. He waited for his moment, then immediately dashed for his skill when he saw an opening. Kenji's expression was stern. His usual cheerful, smiling eyes were instead filled with panic and tension.

Yosano was no different as she fought within the fog. No matter how she attacked, Thou Shalt Not Die would purposely allow itself to be mortally wounded before immediately healing its injuries. Swinging her hatchet and bathing in blood only led to exhaustion for Yosano. Her skill, on the other hand, showed no signs of fatigue, and it kept repeatedly healing itself between its attacks. Yosano was sent flying after a kick from her skill and let out a moan. All she got in return for her depleting stamina were more wounds.

As for Tanizaki—Light Snow was making a complete fool of him. Tanizaki couldn't even see his skill thanks to the illusion. A fist would suddenly appear from time to time, while at other times, it was a kick, knocking him down. His body was riddled with cuts and bruises. Tanizaki staggered to his feet, barely able to even stand, when he was

hit on the head and slammed face-first into the ground. A sharp pain ran through his body; he could feel Light Snow's foot on his head. Slowly, little by little, Tanizaki began losing all feeling in his limbs.

On the rooftop of the Armed Detective Agency's building was Kunikida in the middle of battle. An explosion roared, and the door to the rooftop was blown off the hinges. The Matchless Poet was coming after him. Despite being blown back by the blast wave, Kunikida managed to right himself and make a safe landing. In his hand was a shotgun. Nevertheless, he was covered in dirt and bleeding all over. His face had a ghastly pallor to it as well.

But even then, Kunikida loaded his firearm like a soldier who never gave up. *Crack*. The shotgun unleashed a final death knell.



Outside the factory around the same time, Kyouka was fighting Demon Snow along a pathway surrounded by thick pipes. Sparks flew each time they crossed blades. They clashed, parried, and retreated, only to strike again. While equal in swordsmanship, Kyouka was at a disadvantage in terms of stamina and range. Worst of all, she was hesitant, and that was holding her back.

The cell phone memento from her mother, which was hanging around her neck, swayed with her every move. Kyouka felt its weight against her as she stared fixedly at Demon Snow.

Demon Snow killed my parents...but if I defeat her, she'll merge with me, and I'll turn back into a demon...

I can't forgive her because she took my parents. I don't want to forgive her. I don't want her back because she took my parents. I don't want to become the old me.

Conflicting feelings born from the same cause clouded Kyouka's mind. Demon Snow struck once more, but she blocked and parried the attack with her dagger. However...the parrying dagger was not quick enough to block the second shot. Kyouka immediately crouched, then pulled back to dodge Demon Snow's third strike. As the string tied around her cell phone hovered in the air, Demon Snow cut right through it. Kyouka's eyes reflexively followed the phone as it dropped to the ground.

There was no way Demon Snow was going to let Kyouka get away now.

The red crystal on its forehead glittered.

"There isn't a single person who can conquer their skill."

Shibusawa's voice seemed to echo into the distance.

Defeated
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

The
Matchless
Poet

Super
Deduction

Demon
Snow

Kashomon

CHAPTER IV

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

All
Men
Are
Equal

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

4—1

Above the hissing vat of boiling iron was Akutagawa hanging on for dear life. After falling off the ledge due to the broken handrail, he managed to grab onto the bridge one level lower, though it was nothing more than a single floorboard. He was only hanging on by his left hand; it wouldn't be long before he fell. To make matters worse, Rashomon was still there as well.

Akutagawa had survived this far, but he still couldn't let his guard down. He fixed Rashomon with a penetrating glare, observing its every move, and just as he expected, it approached him and swung its dark blade. It was determined to finish the job. Akutagawa remained calm as he shifted his body, avoiding the blade and crawling back onto the bridge. Akutagawa and Rashomon were facing each other once more.

Rashomon struck first. It unleashed numerous pieces of black fabric that transformed into a cage of swords. Akutagawa dashed about, trying to escape. Each attack he dodged sent a black blade into the bridge that hung over the vat of molten iron, gradually destroying it. The wires holding up one side of the bridge were cut, causing it to slant until the back half dropped into the vat. The sound of metal slowly liquefying followed.

Before he even realized it, Akutagawa was standing in the middle of the bridge with nowhere to go. If he went forward, he would be met with Rashomon's blade, but he couldn't go back because the bridge was slowly lowering into the blast furnace.

"*Tsk.* He almost has me within reach," Akutagawa resentfully spat after lightly clicking his tongue. As long as Rashomon kept launching its black fabric at Akutagawa, he would be able to dodge—which was why it leaped at him to deliver the final blow.

"Just as I'd planned."

Once Rashomon was only a hair's breadth away, Akutagawa grabbed the skill and threw it over his shoulders. The momentum helped launch Rashomon into the vat of molten iron. However...

“...!”

...it didn't melt along with the iron as Akutagawa had hoped. A face wrapped in black fabric peeked out of the molten metal. Rashomon somehow survived temperatures hot enough to melt steel. It slowly ascended the half of the bridge that was sinking into the molten iron.

“...I wouldn't expect any less from my skill. However...,” Akutagawa softly muttered as he pulled a grenade out of his overcoat. The Armed Detective Agency wasn't the only armed organization out there. What kind of mafioso would come to a fight empty-handed?

Rashomon seemed to be slowing down, for there was something sticking to its feet with each step like glue. It was iron.

Rashomon's body was covered in molten metal from the vat that was slowly cooling and cementing its feet onto the metal bridge. The skill appeared bewildered as to why its legs wouldn't move, so Akutagawa pulled the pin from his grenade to capitalize on this moment. He dodged Rashomon's attacks while sliding down the bridge, squeezing the grenade with a roar. Then right as he got close enough, Akutagawa shoved the grenade inside Rashomon's stomach. There was a flash of white light, and the red crystal inside the disembodied skill disintegrated. The humanoid skill then turned into a black mist and was absorbed back into Akutagawa's body, returning to him. The hellhound howled from his coat.

“Good... This is where you belong,” Akutagawa boasted.



Atsushi desperately ran through the mist in the darkness of the night. He was being chased by the tiger, its powerful legs propelling its body off the ground as the beast roared. Atsushi had no idea how far he had run, where Kyouka and the others were, or even where he was now. All he knew was that fleeing the tiger was his only option. He could see something that resembled an iron mill like the one he saw earlier, which meant he was probably still on the factory's property. Atsushi sprinted until he found himself surrounded by thick gray pipes, but the moment after he turned around, he was mauled by the tiger. He managed to barely dodge, but its claws grazed his right arm, and the impact sent Atsushi flying backward.

“...!”

He slammed into the ground, which knocked the wind out of him. His body could hardly move now, let alone function. It was all going to be over if he didn't think fast. Fighting through the pain, Atsushi lifted up his head to look for something—anything—until he

eventually noticed a block of concrete big enough to fit perfectly in his arms. Its surface was so smooth that he wondered how such a large chunk of debris had broken off.

He could use it as a weapon or perhaps for defense as well. At the very least, it was better than nothing. Atsushi frantically approached the concrete block and picked it up. Just then, he heard the violent sound of metal hitting metal nearby.

“...!”

Atsushi looked around in search of the source of the noise and saw that Kyouka was still fighting Demon Snow. Apparently he'd been running for so long that he managed to get this close to them. He watched as Demon Snow nimbly readied its sword.



While Atsushi was fleeing the tiger, Kyouka was desperately locking blades with Demon Snow. Although she managed to somehow escape death when her cell phone caught her off guard, she was already dangerously low on stamina. She also had no idea how much longer her dagger could last. Unlike her skill's blade, Kyouka's dagger was slowly getting whittled away—just like Kyouka herself. Moreover, while every swing of Demon Snow's sword was intended to kill, Kyouka was more hesitant, which contributed greatly to her struggle. Demon Snow attacked once again, its beautiful mask entirely expressionless. It was no more than a murderous puppet.

This demon is the embodiment of slaughter. I...

Kyouka deflected Demon Snow's blade with her dagger.

I...

Various emotions raged inside Kyouka's heart. Demon Snow swung its sword on instinct. It hurt and killed others as if it were only natural. However...

And yet, I...!

Clang! Kyouka's dagger finally broke as she was locking blades with Demon Snow.

“...!” Kyouka gasped. The tip of Demon Snow's sword rapidly approached. Her vision began to waver, and she felt as if she could hear her phone ring.

“...And yet, you wish to use that power to protect everyone, don't you?”

“...!”

Kyouka stopped breathing for a moment. She saw the gentle smile

of a kind woman flash in the back of her mind.

Kyouka... She could almost hear the woman affectionately say her name.

Mom.

Her voice didn't reach the woman. She couldn't talk to her. But even then, she could take those warm words along with the sweet smile and etch them into her heart. She could even make a vow.

"...!"

Kyouka felt something warm trickling down her cheeks.

The illusion she saw was over in a split second, but by the time she snapped out of it, Demon Snow's sword was already mere moments away from her neck.

She's going to slit my throat and kill me.

But the instant she thought that, a voice called out to her: "Kyouka!"

She jumped. It was different from her mother's voice but still just as warm. A tear rolled down her cheek.



"Kyouka!"

By the time Atsushi found her, Kyouka was only moments from being killed. The tip of Demon Snow's sword quickly closed in on Kyouka's throat, but Atsushi sprinted in between them while calling out her name and blocked the attack with the hunk of concrete he was carrying. He was still on the receiving end of the impact, but he didn't care. After all, he was at least able to protect Kyouka. While still blocking the blade, Atsushi whispered to the astonished Kyouka to aim for the red crystal. Demon Snow's sword was deeply embedded in the block of concrete, meaning it would have trouble maneuvering as long as Atsushi held on to the block.

"Now!"

"...!"

Kyouka promptly responded to Atsushi's signal. She launched herself off the ground and threw herself at Demon Snow. In her hand was her kimono's cord, which was usually wrapped around her right shoulder. Kyouka wrapped the cord around her skill's neck as she landed, pressing her back against Demon Snow's in order to use her weight to strangle it. This was an assassination technique used to silently sneak up on the target and dispose of them before they could even say a word. Kyouka then took the hilt of her broken dagger and smashed the red crystal on Demon Snow's forehead. The shards

glittered as they dispersed before a red light swallowed the skill. Not long after, Demon Snow disappeared along with the light.

Did Kyouka get her skill back? Atsushi tried to check when, all of a sudden, the tiger, who had been watching, attacked him once more.

“...!”

I let my guard down...!

The tiger charged straight at him and bit down on his right leg. Just as Atsushi thought he was done for, the tiger picked him up and ran off, concrete block and all. He could see Kyouka start to panic and scramble after them, but the tiger was simply too fast. With Atsushi in its mouth, the beast moved with such speed that it appeared to fly through the gray backdrop. Atsushi was in so much pain that he started to lose consciousness. The tiger suddenly came to a stop in an area surrounded by pipes, likely a dead end, then tossed Atsushi like a bag of bricks. An excruciatingly sharp pain shot through his shoulder when he slammed into the ground, and his entire body creaked. But even then, Atsushi forced his wounded body to sit up.

The tiger suddenly jumped for Atsushi's head. Its jaw opened as if to swallow him whole. The tiger's fangs were fatal, and death was approaching Atsushi. The hairs on Atsushi's body stood on end, and his neural circuits raced to relay all this incoming information. Faced with impending death, Atsushi snapped.

Enough...!

Like hell I'm gonna die here!

The will to live consumed him. He feverishly slammed the block of concrete into the tiger's chin.

A shout—a cry—a roar shook the air around it.

There was no way of telling whether the beastly howl came from Atsushi or the tiger. Nevertheless, an impact followed, and the tiger uttered a shriek. But Atsushi still felt it wasn't enough and kicked the block of concrete forward into the tiger's mouth, sending Demon Snow's sword, which was still embedded in the concrete, right through the beast's upper jaw. The white blade pierced the red crystal.

“...!”

The crystal was reduced to dust, and along with a radiant light, the tiger eventually disappeared.

Did I win...?

The block of concrete collapsed to the ground.



Silence returned to the pipe-walled pathways, and there were no signs

of the tiger returning.

I did it...

Atsushi, overcome with relief and exhaustion, felt his legs give out and he dropped to the ground. Kyouka, who had been chasing after him, rushed over and crouched by Atsushi's side.

"You're hurt!" She checked the wounds on Atsushi's arms with a worried gaze.

"I'm fine... Once my powers come back, those'll all get better on their own with my tiger's healing ability."

After Atsushi assured her he was all right, Kyouka let out a sigh of relief...but she immediately looked up, apparently having noticed something. Curious, Atsushi followed her gaze until he saw a jet-black tower standing in the mist. The bizarrely shaped structure seemed to subjugate the moon and rule over the night. It was the perfect home for a demon lord.

Skull Fortress.

That was where the man behind this fog—Tatsuhiko Shibusawa—should be. After defeating their skills and getting their powers back, all they had left to do was take care of Shibusawa. They just needed to go to Skull Fortress. More importantly, that was where Dazai was. Atsushi had no idea why he was there, but he was sure of at least one thing:

Dazai will know what to do once we save him.

Atsushi had felt Kyouka glance in his direction when he'd muttered those words.

All of a sudden, someone held an old cell phone out between Atsushi and Kyouka. It was Kyouka's phone that had fallen on the ground earlier. The one trying to hand it to her was none other than Demon Snow. No longer was there a red crystal on its mask's forehead. It didn't seem hostile, either. Kyouka stood up and gently took the phone from its hands—as if she were handling something precious. Demon Snow then softly glowed before being absorbed back into Kyouka.

This is it...

"...You got your skill back, huh?" asked Atsushi. Kyouka faintly nodded, then tied the cell phone's strings together and hung it around her neck. Atsushi was relieved to see her like that, but there was still one problem—his own skill. Atsushi looked down at his body and furrowed his brow. "My tiger's healing powers haven't come back yet."

He was still riddled with wounds and in immense pain.

I defeated the tiger, so why...?

"Why did only your skill return and not mine?"

But Atsushi's question was only met with a few heavy coughs in

the distance. *Cough. Hack.* Approaching them was Akutagawa, who seemed to be having trouble breathing. His fight had apparently been rough, but while his body was covered with scars, his eyes were brimming with confidence. His dignified stance made it clear who the victor was.

“...Did you get your skill back, too?” Atsushi asked Akutagawa, who now stood right in front of him. Both Kyouka and Akutagawa fought their skill and won, just as Atsushi had.

“So why am I the only one who hasn’t?” He clenched his fist out of frustration.

“You fool,” spewed Akutagawa. “Have you seriously not figured it out yet?!”

“...!”

Atsushi tensed, taken aback by the sudden insults. The first thing that popped into his head was the memory of the director at the orphanage insulting him in the same manner...along with that majestic white door. The images ran through Atsushi’s mind over and over again, but he had no idea what the door meant.

“What...?” muttered Atsushi absentmindedly.

I want to know the answer, but my brain won’t let me think. My head hurts so bad, it feels like it’s about to split open. But why?

“Why?!” he cried. Atsushi didn’t understand what was going on. His arms naturally curled around his body as if to protect himself. A memory of a mysterious door and a skill that wouldn’t return—were the two somehow related? Did Akutagawa know something? The frustration caused Atsushi to faintly tremble. Akutagawa then strode by him as his black overcoat flapped in the wind.

“Akutagawa!” Atsushi screamed in spite of himself. “What’s that supposed to mean?! Answer me!”

But Akutagawa didn’t look back. He simply disappeared into the fog as he headed toward the fortress.

Why...? Why...?! Why am I the only one who doesn’t get it?!

An indescribable fear crept up Atsushi’s body. Kyouka, who had kept quiet until now, tightly pursed her lips and instructed, “You’re hurt badly. Stay here and rest.”

“Huh?” Atsushi stared vacantly at her, his mouth agape. He couldn’t process what she had just said. Kyouka turned her back to him.

“Kyouka...?” He called out to her, his voice wavering.

“I’m sorry for not telling you. I didn’t want you to know.”

“Know what?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, she answered:

“...That I control Demon Snow with my cell phone.” Kyouka glanced back at Atsushi. “...And that I actually didn’t want to hate

her.”

“...”

I had no idea she felt this way...

Atsushi was overcome with shock and guilt that he didn't know—that he didn't even notice.

“I'll carry out the mission,” promised Kyouka with a calm, determined expression. She then began to walk up ahead into the fog where Akutagawa disappeared as well. She was heading to the fortress.

“Kyouka! Wait!”

Atsushi tried to chase after her, but his wounded body could hardly move. He tried to stand up, only to immediately fall back down. Atsushi couldn't drag himself off the jagged ground.

“Kyouka...!” he screamed, feeling as if his vocal cords were going to shred. But no matter how many times he called her name, his voice didn't reach her. The fog began to grow thicker until Kyouka was no longer visible. Then, the fortress vanished beneath the mist. And eventually, the white darkness absorbed Atsushi as well.

That night, Yokohama was covered in fog and countless people simply disappeared. Those outside of the fog tried all kinds of things to contact those within but to no avail. While many people dealt with the collateral damage, Ango Sakaguchi from the Special Division for Unusual Powers strived to solve the root of the problem. That was why he evacuated, so as to not get caught up in the fog, and constantly tried to get in touch with someone inside ever since. Even after his call with Kunikida, Ango remained in the operations room to lay the detailed groundwork needed to fix this crisis. The others in the division were no different. The sounds of countless monitors running and keyboards being typed on mixed together in the operations room. Ango suddenly heard clamoring on the other side of the door.

“...He’s here,” Ango muttered softly.

“Who’s here?” curiously asked a staff member who heard him.

“A5158,” replied Ango with disarming simplicity as he continued typing away, unlike the worker who had asked him.

All of a sudden, the door to the operations room was kicked open. The bent door flew into the air before bounding off the ground. A shadowy figure slowly walked through the now-useless entranceway. He wore a long, glossy-black overcoat and a black hat made from the same material. His shaggy brown hair peeked out from underneath his hat. His personalized three-piece suit perfectly fit his smaller frame, giving him a gentlemanly, sophisticated air.

Unique.

That word alone could sum him up. His dominating presence, the otherworldly atmosphere, his piercing eyes that stood out from his beautiful features—everything about him was unique. He placed his black-gloved hands in his pockets.

“Pretty ballsy of you to call for me over the phone like I’m some delivery guy,” haughtily claimed the man—Chuuya Nakahara. The Special Division workers clamored over the sudden appearance of a Port Mafia executive. However, Ango didn’t reply. He first stood up and told the other workers to leave.

Chuuya silently stared at Ango. Only after the others left them alone did Ango face him and say, “This is a government facility. Do you seriously think you’ll get away with this?”

“That’s for me to decide.” Chuuya shot Ango a sharp gaze. “Not you.”

"You owe me a debt."

"No, you owe me," replied Chuuya without missing a beat.

"...What do you mean?" Light reflected off Ango's glasses, obscuring his expression.

"Don't play dumb. You really think I don't know?" pressed Chuuya with a menacing voice. He scowled at Ango spitefully. "I'm talking about six years ago!"

Ango quietly narrowed his eyes, but he didn't say a word.

"That's what's wrong with you!" Chuuya slammed his fist against the wall, leaving behind a small crater. Ango's silence seemed to be eating away at his patience. Pieces of the wall crumbled onto the ground. After displaying his overwhelming strength, Chuuya glared at Ango, making it clear he wasn't going to tolerate any lies. Nevertheless, Ango remained calm.

"What are you talking about?" Ango asked with a matter-of-fact tone.

"Shibusawa killed dozens during the Dragon's Head Conflict six years ago...but you bureaucrats were the ones pullin' the strings," growled Chuuya.

"..."

"You did it to stop the conflict that had taken hold of Yokohama. That was why ya threw Shibusawa into the battle," he continued. "But he doesn't give a shit about keepin' the peace, so all that did was increase the body count." He frowned bitterly. "But the government kept protectin' him anyway because he was a valuable skill user who could counteract a nationwide invasion of skill users. So ya just decided to look the other way, no matter how many people he killed overseas. You even wiped his ass for him and covered up the evidence... Really brings a tear to your eye."

Ango neither confirmed nor denied the accusations as Chuuya sarcastically laughed. He was completely right, after all. Six years ago, a war among various underground organizations started in Yokohama over a sum of five hundred billion yen. The government dispatched Shibusawa, whom they had been keeping on a short leash, into the conflict to cease the fighting, but it turned out that Shibusawa was actually the one keeping the government on a short leash. He unhesitatingly ignored the government's orders. For one reason or another, Shibusawa widened the conflict as if he was seizing some sort of opportunity and claimed countless lives.

Normally, someone like Shibusawa who ignored orders and betrayed the government would be immediately disposed of. And yet, the government didn't kill Shibusawa—they couldn't. They simply could not part with such an individual, so they had no choice but to let him do as he pleased. Just as Chuuya claimed, even when

Shibusawa killed a skill user abroad, the government would destroy the evidence and curtail any particulars so that other countries wouldn't even know about his existence.

Kunikida was absolutely right when he said that international intelligence agencies would surely have been aware of such a powerful skill user. No one would find it strange if someone like Shibusawa was known worldwide.

Nevertheless, nothing was known about Shibusawa because the Special Division for Unusual Powers was keeping him hidden. Shibusawa's skill was highly unique. If there was ever another giant war with skill users like there had been last year, his skill would surely be of great use to them, which was why the government decided to protect him in case something happened.

...Until Shibusawa returned to Japan and carried out an attack on Yokohama, that is.

That was where the government made its greatest blunder. Shibusawa was clearly not someone who could be kept under their thumb, and they had no idea that he had *multiple* accomplices who led him to Yokohama.

Knowing both the government's intentions and its miscalculations, Ango calmly admitted, "...Everything we did was to ensure the peace and security of this nation."

Chuuya grimaced, then grabbed Ango by the collar and lifted him off the ground. "I've had enough of your shit, Professor Glasses...!" Chuuya's eyes were murderous. "Six of my men would still be alive if you government dogs hadn't brought him here!"

He could still remember every face of his subordinates who died six years ago when their lives were just getting started. He could even remember their faces after they were killed by Shibusawa. There was no way he could forget.

"Are you going to kill me?" asked Ango as he gasped for air. His gaze was stern. "Go ahead. I prepared myself for this moment the instant I decided to ask you for help."

"Then it's settled," replied Chuuya before violently tossing Ango onto the operations room's spotless floor. He then looked down at Ango and coolly declared, "I'll take the job, and you'll pay me with your life."

His unfeeling expression sent shivers down Ango's spine. He gasped as a cold sweat ran down his forehead. But even then, Ango didn't regret a single thing he'd said.

There's no other option. It's time to signal a counterattack, for the good of Yokohama and its people.

Interlude—3

Osamu Dazai was standing within Draconia inside the fortress at the center of the fog. Countless red crystals glittered on the shelves on the wall, each indicating the life and death of the past owners. As Dazai silently gazed at the crystals, he heard the door open loudly behind him. He looked back to find Fyodor standing at the entrance.

“All according to plan,” claimed Fyodor while closing the door with his hand behind his back. He was holding a key with his delicate fingers and placed it into the keyhole as if he were doing a magic trick. *Click*. The door locked. They were the only two people in Draconia now, and the sweet smell of secrecy filled the air.

“Yes, all according to plan,” Dazai quietly agreed. He then added with a sigh, “It was a real pain in the ass, sneaking in without him suspecting anything.”

Fyodor didn’t approach Dazai but instead walked over to the edge of Draconia as if he were rummaging through the crystals on the wall.

“By the way...,” said Dazai. “Why are you *really* helping me?”

“I simply wanted to see the world as I think it ought to be.” Fyodor continued to observe the shelves as he walked. “The more sideshows, the better. Don’t you agree?”

He reached for a shelf and picked up two crystals, but Dazai was more interested in what he meant by sideshows. “So the question is: Who plays the clown, huh?” he asked with surprising indifference. “I didn’t want to join forces with you, but I had no choice if I wanted to make Shibusawa the clown,” groaned Dazai as he gently lowered his gaze. “Besides, the man even has the Japanese government wrapped around his finger.”

Fyodor faintly smirked in agreement. “After all, he was planning on covering Yokohama in fog with or without *your* guidance, Dazai.”

With the two crystals in hand, Fyodor changed directions. Dazai began to follow. From opposite ends of the room, they headed toward the vacant pedestal in the center of Draconia, slowly approaching each other until they were almost face-to-face, but neither stopped. They crossed paths, then slowly turned around and faced each other.

“Here.” Fyodor held out both crystals. “Out of all these skill crystals, these two make the best pair.”

The crystals floated above his hands and began to rotate as red light reflected off them like chandeliers. Fyodor promptly described the two crystals as if he’d had his eyes on them for quite some time.

“One of these crystals can summon all skill users within view into a single location. The other fuses the abilities of skill users who come into contact with one another into one single skill...” Fyodor flashed a sinister grin. “Absorbing the entire collection using these two crystals will cut off the fog’s energy source. With that, he will no longer be able to sustain the fog.”

Just as Shibusawa mentioned earlier, he was only able to create and maintain a fog of this scale because of his huge collection. Therefore, one could easily get rid of the fog if they were to gather all the crystals in Draconia and simultaneously nullify them...which was something that Dazai could do with the two skills Fyodor selected. However, Dazai wouldn’t be able to manage this alone, for he could only nullify a skill while touching it. Although Dazai himself could nullify the fog, he couldn’t nullify it so that it wouldn’t affect others, much less do anything about a fog that covered the entire city of Yokohama. More importantly, Dazai couldn’t outsmart Shibusawa alone. That was why he needed Fyodor’s help.

The three of them gathered at Skull Fortress, each with their own goals and intentions, which was why they had an idea of what the other wanted, making them wary of a betrayal. It was a three-way contest that had reached a stalemate.

However, what would happen if two people shared the same goal? That would create a power imbalance. Dazai was able to outsmart Shibusawa because he joined forces with Fyodor to rid Yokohama of the fog. Both Dazai and Fyodor knew there was no way to prevent Shibusawa from targeting Yokohama, so they decided to cooperate with him in order to infiltrate the fortress.

Fyodor raised the two skill-enclosed crystals into the air and softly said, “Now, use your skill to nullify these shells and return the abilities to their rightful forms.”

Dazai reached for the crystals just as Fyodor urged him to. “I hope Atsushi and the others are okay...”

The moment his fingers touched the crystals, their hard gemlike surfaces cracked, and they melted away.

Drip. Trails of light suddenly transformed into a liquid-like blood, swirling around and mixing together in the air. The two lights melted into one and spun until they formed a single sphere.

They had produced a single apple—a juicy, poisoned apple red as blood.

The apple appeared in Dazai’s hand and gently rose to the ceiling before stopping. It birthed a skill—and an extremely powerful one at that—the ability to absorb. Every last crystal adorning Draconia’s walls was sucked into the apple with intense force. Ten—a hundred—a thousand—two thousand—every last one was greedily devoured by

the apple, and their light turned into a storm that ravaged Draconia. The light was so blinding that neither Dazai nor Fyodor could even keep their eyes open. The apple swelled as it absorbed the numerous crystals until the red light became hotter than the surface of hell. The intense power within overwhelmed the collection room, but even then, Dazai dauntlessly regarded the sphere of red light he created and muttered:

“It’ll all be over once I touch it.”

His dignified visage was rife with determination and duty. Right as Dazai reached for the massive photosphere...

Thud!

Something struck him in the back.

“...!”

His eyes opened wide. He could feel a burning pain shoot through his chest.

“Didn’t I tell you?” a man said to Dazai from behind. His white hair fluttered as his crimson eyes narrowed in amusement. “No one will ever exceed my expectations.”

Standing behind Dazai was Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, who supposedly had no way of even *entering* Draconia. In his hand was a knife that glowed dully as it pierced Dazai’s back. He smiled while slowly twisting the blade even deeper. It was followed by the unsettling sound of flesh rending. Shibusawa, who had been in Draconia for who knew how long, let go of the knife.

“Letting your guard down the moment your plan was about to succeed? I thought you were better than that,” admitted Shibusawa with a mix of disappointment and ridicule. The walls and floor behind him had become transparent, giving a wide view of a vast collection of skill crystals. The ones that Dazai had absorbed were merely a small section of it.

Struggling to remain standing, Dazai clenched his chest and moaned, “The door...was locked...” He turned his gaze toward the door, then at Fyodor, who had locked it. Fyodor was smiling. He looked delighted, like he was enjoying watching Dazai get stabbed. That was all it took for Dazai to understand what happened.

“I see,” he groaned. He could feel lukewarm blood slowly begin to stain his sand-colored overcoat. “So this is where you betray me...”

“I told you, right? The more sideshows, the better.” Fyodor faced Dazai with a frigid smirk. “You’re the sideshow.”

He was never on Dazai’s side. The plan was to lure Dazai into Draconia and have Shibusawa stab him. This two-versus-one struggle wasn’t against Shibusawa—it was against Dazai. Fyodor pretended to be on his side so he could bring him to the collection room and merely pretend to lock the door, allowing Shibusawa to come and go as he

pleased.

“So...?” Dazai said between labored breaths, shooting Shibusawa an incendiary look. “What’s your next move?”

Dazai then collapsed.

“There is no next move. I already found the skill I was searching for.” Shibusawa lightly gestured to him with an open hand. “Yours.”

Shibusawa’s eyes gleefully lit up as he gazed down at Dazai on the floor. “From the very start, you were the only one I was after.”

Those were the eyes of a child who had just found the insect he had been eagerly waiting to pin to his collection.

Dazai sighed in exasperation. “I thought a paring knife would only hurt so much, but...” He glanced in Shibusawa’s direction. “...poison, huh?”

“A lethal anesthetic.” Shibusawa’s lips masochistically curled at Dazai, who couldn’t even lift a finger. “Enjoy,” he said with a saccharine note in his voice. “It’s what you always wanted—death.”

“How could you...do such a thing...?” Dazai muttered feebly while maintaining his sarcastic expression. His vision blurred as his limbs lost all sensation. The world he knew slowly began to melt away, and in its place, eternal peace approached as a way of salvation. A calm, endless world of darkness. Dazai’s body was wrapped in the gentle touch of death.

“It feels...so good...”

He faintly smirked and closed his eyes. His shallow breaths came to a halt. Dazai’s muscles relaxed, and his messy hair drowned in the pool of blood.

That was the final moment of Osamu Dazai’s life.



Tatsuhiko Shibusawa expressed no interest in the abrupt demise of the man who was always seeking death. He was more focused on Dazai’s body. Before long, a crystal emerged from it. Fyodor grinned as he cast an admiring look at the clear-white light of the crystal. “With the host dead, the skill has begun separating itself from its owner.”

Shibusawa’s fog had the power to separate skills from their owners. Up until now, Dazai’s skill had been nullifying its effect, but it stopped working the moment he died. In other words, Shibusawa was finally able to obtain Dazai’s skill through killing him. He trembled in delight while reaching for the skill crystal.

“Ah... I’ve never felt such a thrill.”

To Shibusawa, this was the skill he had always dreamed of. That

was why he had left the pedestal in the center of Draconia empty. He wanted to display his longed-for crystal. He reached forward to touch the glittering skill, but all of a sudden, it began to change.

“...!”

The crystal gradually turned red. The encroachment didn't stop until the white crystal went from a venomous red to crimson. The white crystal that was born from Dazai's body was no more. Shibusawa's eyes opened wide.

“No... Is this not it?”

Trembling, Shibusawa took a step back.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

He didn't even notice Fyodor's hideously twisted smirk. The crimson crystal gradually grew brighter until the massive red sphere of light near the ceiling began reacting to it. The two lights were drawn to each other: the red light from the collection of skill crystals Dazai and Fyodor made together and the crimson light from Dazai's crystallized skill.

A crimson sphere of light possessing an enormous amount of energy was coming to life. The confidence vanished from Shibusawa's expression, for this wasn't something he could have ever predicted. He looked up at the rampantly swelling sphere of light with sunken eyes.

“What...?”

Just what on earth is this thing?

But Shibusawa was suddenly knocked back by the growing orb before he could get his answer.

Undeclared
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

Super
Deduction

The
Matchless
Poet

Demon
Snow

Rashomon

CHAPTER V

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

All
Men
Are
Equal

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

5—1

Atsushi was all alone outside the iron mill covered in fog. Both Akutagawa and Kyouka had left him behind. Akutagawa had pelted him with insults while Kyouka expressed her concern, but regardless, they both went on ahead without him.

Only Atsushi remained stagnant. Unlike the other two, there were no signs of his skill returning. The wounds left by the tiger still stung as blood trickled down his arms.

What is it that I'm missing?

A strong wind suddenly gusted by the moment Atsushi lowered his head, but when he curiously looked up to see what it was, he gasped. There, amid the fog, stood a familiar white door—sturdy, majestic, divine. The wind was coming from that door, which was eating away at Atsushi deep down.

“Do not open that door!”

“...!”

Atsushi heard a familiar reprimanding voice from behind and jumped. He timidly turned around to find the orphanage director haughtily looking down at him. Perhaps Atsushi was dreaming again. Perhaps it was an illusion. Regardless, just seeing the man made Atsushi's heart heavy with despair. How hurt the director's malicious words made him. How lonely they made him feel. How many hardships had he faced because of him.

Atsushi couldn't contain his resentment. *If it wasn't for him...*, he thought. The director's commanding voice was exactly as it was when Atsushi was in the orphanage, and it bore a hole in his mind.

“But no matter. You don't have the power to open it now even if you wanted to... You still lack determination.”

“You don't know a single thing about me!” Atsushi wanted to scream.

He used to be terrified about standing up for himself, but he

wasn't the same boy from the orphanage anymore. The child starving for a place to belong no longer existed.

The wind grew stronger, sapping Atsushi's strength as if to prevent him from so much as standing. Even the director was seemingly trying to hold him back as well.

"You have finally lost the tiger's power. Say your good-byes and move on with your life... Oh, don't worry. Nobody expects anything from you."

He's probably right.

After all, neither Akutagawa nor Kyouka had asked him to go with them. To tell the truth, Atsushi was deadweight. He was terribly injured, and he couldn't even use his skill.

But..., Atsushi thought.

He wasn't about to let the director tell him what to do anymore.

"...I won't listen to you."

He turned his hate into anger and his anger into strength, then took a step forward. Even though he felt as though the gale was going to blow him away—even though his wounds still hurt, Atsushi didn't stop. He was going to crawl to the door if he had to. Every step he took brought him farther out of the director's control.

I'm not afraid of him anymore...!

Atsushi planted a hand on the door with unwavering determination. He heard the director's grating voice call out to him, *"There's no going back once you learn the truth."*

"...?!"

Atsushi was suddenly overcome with fear. His legs almost gave out while his hand still rested on the door.

Why? Is it because...this door must never be opened?

Atsushi didn't even understand himself, but his body cowered in fear. His eyes couldn't focus. His fingers trembled as they reached for the door.

"What's wrong?" He could hear the director ridicule him in his head. *"It isn't locked, you know."*

Sweat dripped down his body as he struggled to steady his breathing. His hand on the door twitched.

Skull Fortress pierced the skies of Yokohama, the city of demons. The owner of the tower, Shibusawa, was defenselessly opening his eyes wide on the top floor in Draconia. There was nothing left of his ruler-like behavior as he helplessly watched what was happening in mute dread. A hellish red light radiated as a violent wind gusted from the giant sphere. This wasn't part of Shibusawa's plan. He shuddered. That was when Fyodor began to speak up as if he were reciting a fairy tale.

"The ability to fuse and the ability to nullify—two conflicting skills have become one, creating a singularity."

"...!"

Shibusawa looked over at Fyodor, who sounded like he'd expected this to happen. Or perhaps...this was the *outline* of Fyodor's story.

Shibusawa was dumbfounded in mute amazement as Fyodor pulled out a skull. His heels clicked against the ground as he approached the Collector.

"Even Dazai's skill isn't going to give you what you truly seek... Your lost memories won't return."

"How do you know about that?!"

Shibusawa turned pale, and he instinctively stood back up as Fyodor flashed him a sweet smile.

"Not to worry." Fyodor's eyes glowed cruelly. "I will fill those lost memories for you—"

There wasn't even a moment for Shibusawa to question him, for the smiling Conjurer pulled out a paring knife he'd been keeping hidden and slit Shibusawa's throat with its silver blade.

"Gah...!"

Shibusawa's eyes rolled back into his head. All he could see was the red blood spraying out of his neck. Like countless skill crystals shattering—like a beautiful flower blooming—the blood fell like rain. He went into shock due to the intense pain to the point that his nerves couldn't feel a thing. The scenery before him gradually began to change.

"—with *death*."

Shibusawa could see Fyodor smiling on the other side of the blood. "Do you remember anything?" Fyodor asked.

Shibusawa heard a powerful wind roaring in his head. "...I see." It finally made sense to him. As his body fell to the ground, he thought:

I know...this feeling.

The end of his life was also its brightest moment. It was an uninterrupted combination of hope and despair.

This was death.

The white light of death flooded his vision. The memories of a distant past sprang to life with his demise.



Tatsuhiko Shibusawa saw an illusion in the white light. It was a vision of what really happened six years ago. He was forced to watch these lost memories replay before his eyes. He could hear the old Shibusawa in the vision speak in a soft voice:

“The director appears to misunderstand your skill.”

The Shibusawa of six years ago was standing in a stone-walled cellar. The sole light source came from the window so high up on the wall that only the blue sky was visible. It was as if he were in a prison, unable to set foot in the outside world, nor even be allowed to see it.

Inside the old stone room was a suspicious-looking gauge and a large piece of medical equipment. However, what stood out the most was the boy sitting in the center of the room. His extremely frail arms and legs were bound to a metal chair with metal bands that appeared to be rather sturdy. They didn’t even budge, no matter how much the boy struggled. His filthy shoes miserably tapped against the floor.

“The skill you possess is extraordinarily rare...,” continued the Shibusawa of six years ago while ignoring the boy’s suffering. He seemed to be in a trance. *“It’s the only skill envied by skill users the world over. However...”* His voice deepened. *“Perhaps because of your youth, your skill is tucked deep inside of you—so deep that not even my fog can draw it out.”*

The ray of light peeking in through the window did not reach Shibusawa.

“That is why...” His red eyes eerily glowed like a demon’s. *“...I’m doing this for your sake.”*

His expression brimming with compassion, Shibusawa pressed the switch in his hands, sending a powerful electric shock to the boy’s chair.

The boy screamed. His cries filled the room. His limbs convulsed as he thrashed about, but the metal constraints binding him to the chair didn’t break. The electric shock continued to surge through his body until the excessive voltage turned into violet bolts of electricity. This starving, malnourished twelve-year-old boy could not withstand the pain. His cranial nerves began to fry. His muscle fibers tore, and

his blood vessels burst open. The boy's chin quivered.

"Now..."

Shibusawa gazed at the boy's face, making his satisfaction and delight no secret.

"...surprise me."

Atsushi hesitated in front of the door that had appeared amid the fog.

What's on the other side of this door? What am I so afraid of?

There was no end to the questions. The fear wasn't going away, either. That was when a boy shrieked from the other side.

"...!"

Atsushi knew that was no ordinary scream, and he summoned all his courage. In that moment, he noticed a dynamic tiger etched on the magnificent white door.

He pried the heavy door open with everything he had. It creaked, and on the other side was a stone room.

It was an unusual room. The ceiling was high, and while there was sunlight coming in from the window, it felt oddly confined for some reason. Numerous machines littered the space, and countless cables extended toward its center.

In that room's center stood a man with long hair and his back turned to Atsushi. Next to him was a child thrashing about in a chair. Atsushi's heart froze.

What is that? Who...is that?

The buzzing sound of electricity echoed, followed by a bloodcurdling cry.

A boy was being electrocuted while bound to the chair...

The boy crying and screaming was Atsushi six years ago!

What's going on?!

Atsushi stood at the doorway at a loss for words.

Why? How? Atsushi couldn't think straight. He felt dizzy.

What is this? I don't remember any of this.

He started to recall something, but he shook his head.

...Did I simply forget?

No. This memory had just been locked away behind a door deep within my mind, hadn't it? Because I wanted to forget that part of my past.

The Atsushi of six years ago screamed in agony as if forcing his present self to face his past. Atsushi slowly came to a realization as he

watched.

Six years ago, I met a man named Tatsuhiko Shibusawa. I'd forgotten about him for a long time, but that was why I felt like something was bothering me whenever I heard his name and saw his picture.

Shibusawa had visited Atsushi when he was in the orphanage. He'd locked him in a room, hooked him up to various instruments after tying him to a chair, and ran an electric current through his body. What Atsushi was watching now was a vision of his past. His memories showed Shibusawa watching as he writhed in agony. Before long, a crystal-like gem emerged from the young Atsushi's chest. The crystal was pale and glittered like the moon.

"Wow..." uttered Shibusawa.

Atsushi could see a strange grin appear on the man's face...but then something unusual happened. The screaming suddenly stopped, and the young Atsushi's eyes flew open to reveal the eyes of a savage tiger. His black pupils shook within his golden irises. His slender arms transformed into forelegs with claws, and his filthy shoes burst open as his feet became muscular hind legs. After the sturdy metal constraints around his arms and legs instantly shattered like glass, he devoured the pale crystal that had separated from his body, and his ferocious fangs meshed.

Shibusawa began to panic, but it was too late. The young Atsushi had already completed his transformation. He mowed down the chair that once constrained him, destroyed every major piece of equipment in the room, and then—his tiger claws slashed clean through Shibusawa's face.

His skin peeled straight off as the claws carved through his skull. The white room was painted with blood. Like countless skill crystals shattering—like a beautiful flower blooming—the blood fell like rain.

"I remember now."



In the room of memories created by the fog, the eighteen-year-old Atsushi suddenly found himself facing Tatsuhiko Shibusawa—not the man killed by the tiger six years ago but a dim shadow of a man who had lost the light in his eyes. He didn't know why he was watching the same memory as Atsushi. He was too focused on himself to care.

"Oh..." Atsushi mumbled after recalling the memories once sealed in the depths of his mind.

"I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face..."

Atsushi tormented himself with those words over and over.

Tatsuhiko Shibusawa began similarly muttering to himself:

“I pressed the switch...”

Deep scars from the tiger’s giant claws appeared on his face just like they had six years ago. The memories once lost had now returned. He even remembered being killed after the tortured boy fought back. But why did Shibusawa target Atsushi six years ago in the first place? The reason was simple.

“Because I heard that your skill was the one that guided the envy of all skill users.”

Atsushi was clearly startled. “Who did you hear that from?”

“A Russian man named Fyodor,” Shibusawa replied. “And that was also the day I—”



“Yes,” Fyodor muttered to himself as Tatsuhiko Shibusawa journeyed his lost memories. Fyodor was now the only living person in Draconia. Dazai’s body lay on the floor while Shibusawa had vanished into thin air.

Under the colossal red photosphere, Fyodor expressed no concern about the other two people as he lowered his gaze to the skull in his hand. It was the skull that was always put on display with the apples on the top floor of Skull Fortress.

Crack. The paint began to peel off the skull.

Rattle. Crack. Crack. Rattle, rattle, rattle!

It was like listening to countless insects hatch from their eggs. Across the white skull’s forehead were deep gashes from an animal’s claws—the claws of a tiger. The skull, which had been on display in the fortress all this time, belonged to Shibusawa.

“That was the day you died,” whispered Fyodor to Shibusawa’s skull as if he took pity on him. “And the one who inherited your collection was...” He cast a glance at the spot where Tatsuhiko Shibusawa had been standing moments ago. “...your skill itself after it separated from your corpse.”

There must have been a red crystal somewhere on Shibusawa’s body, for in the end, he was nothing more than a puppet who believed he was human. He was a real-life Coppélia.

Fyodor raised the skull into the air. Countless red trails of light soared through Draconia, revealing a hidden room under the floor where myriads of other crystals were stored. The red sphere of light would grow exponentially if it absorbed these, for there were far more hidden crystals than all the ones on display. Fyodor sinisterly grinned

as he stared into space.

“You’d forgotten your own death and became a crystal—a crystal who managed the collection that he himself was part of. The tiger’s claws sank into your skull and killed you.”



“I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face. I sank my claws into his face...”

Atsushi continued to blame himself as if time had stopped six years ago in that stone room.

I thought my skill had finally awakened after I got away from the orphanage and was left for dead in the street...but I was wrong.

Atsushi’s skill had actually awakened long before that. He’d wielded the tiger’s power once prior.

It all started...when he killed Shibusawa.

The guilt suffocated him, and he continued to torment himself. Tatsuhiko Shibusawa—or rather, the skill who looked identical to him—grumbled, “Yes, you killed me that day...”

“...!”

Shibusawa’s accusatory tone rubbed Atsushi the wrong way. It stoked his swelling, almost overflowing, feelings of guilt until his emotions burst out of him.

This is my fault?! No, that can’t be right!

He didn’t want to believe it. Atsushi turned on Shibusawa and screamed in spite of himself, “Of course I did!”



The cries of his heart turned into a roar.

I didn't do anything wrong! I...!

"I just wanted to live!" he yelled with every fiber of his being. He thought he would break down if he didn't.

Atsushi had always fought to protect himself. He would turn anything into a weapon to do so.

What's wrong with an insatiable hunger for survival?!

"A boy will always use his claws in order to live!!"

He felt the heavy deadbolt snap on the white door.



Countless red spirals flashed in the collection room as the red sphere of light glistened with greater intensity. It was as if Draconia itself had come to life and was wielding its overflowing power. Hundreds—thousands—of skills were devoured by the ever-growing light until it started to even suck in Osamu Dazai's corpse. His body floated into the air before being slowly swallowed by the light. Fyodor, who had been mirthfully observing the rampaging orb, expressed some surprise.

"...You're a greedy man, Dazai." He squinted as he saw Dazai merge with the light. "Even in death, you still plan to see this city's demise."

Dazai's body melted into the red photosphere. Immediately, the light expanded throughout the room like an explosion, shattering the glass windows. Fyodor watched as the whirlpool of light-headed toward the outer world, then said to the skull in his hand:

"Allow me to enlighten you, since I'm your first friend ever. Did you ever stop to consider why my skill doesn't separate from me within this fog?"

Skills would separate from their users and try to kill them if they ever came into contact with the fog. Nothing could change that. That was why the Armed Detective Agency was forced to battle against their own skills and why Dazai's skill finally separated from him when he died. Nevertheless, Fyodor wasn't killed by his skill. But why?

Fyodor's footsteps echoed throughout Draconia while he slowly walked across the room as if that were his answer. He stopped to pick up an apple, but when he reached for it, there was a glittering red crystal on "his" hand—a man who looked identical to Fyodor. "He" picked up the apple while Fyodor held the skull. They raised their spherical objects into the air with their backs to each other and

whispered:

“I am crime.”

“I am punishment.”

Their identical voices shook Draconia. It was as if the cold, rigid echoes ridiculed and toyed with the entire situation.

“Did you know?” said Fyodor with a laugh as he held the skull aloft.

“Crime and punishment are very close friends,” continued the other Fyodor, smiling as he held the apple.

They faced opposite directions but felt the same thing. They could sense the red light surrounding Skull Fortress. They recited their lines alternately:

“The boundaries will vanish.”

“The room will awaken.”

The red light swelled before their eyes, and they enticed it with their honeyed words.

“Incarnation of death—lord of the skill-consuming fog.”

“Ravage, devour, and unleash your fury as your instinct and heart desire.”

Their violet eyes creased as their lips curled into a smile.

A light thereupon shot out of the fortress as if it were following their commands. The boundless glow began swallowing the world in a red fog that grew exponentially by the second until it eventually took the form of a giant beast. It curled around Skull Fortress under the pale moonlight and came to life. The imposing creature consumed the moon, shrouded itself among the clouds, and scattered the fog. Even Skull Fortress appeared to be nothing more than a child's toy in the presence of the dignified beast.

Its serpentine body was covered in glittering scales and a long, majestic mane. It could surely crush a building with its reptilian-like hands. Each one of its sadistic fangs was much larger than any human. It was a rare creature equally wicked and divine.

A dragon.

Fyodor watched with an almost chillingly beautiful smile as the creature, which wasn't even supposed to exist in the world of man, appeared before him.

“This is neither a loss of control nor a singularity,” he said as if he were reciting an oracle. “The dragon is the true form of the chaos within each and every skill.”

The dragon descended upon Yokohama and roared, making its presence known to the world.

“A dragon...?!”

Akutagawa’s eyes bulged as he sprinted toward Skull Fortress. Just up ahead was a massive dragon that looked as if it was guarding the tower.

“...” Kyouka, who was running close by Akutagawa’s side, bit her lip when she caught sight of the creature as well.

An extraordinarily gargantuan enemy stood in their way. They could see it with their eyes, feel it on their skin. The dragon’s ferocious power felt almost crushing.



Even the Special Division for Unusual Powers, watching Skull Fortress from a satellite, instantaneously became aware of the dragon.

“Abnormal values for singularity are increasing!” shrieked a staff member from the Division’s operations room. The values displayed on the operator’s screen rose as he was overcome with fear and panic.

“They’re twice—no, 2.5 times higher than they were six years ago!”

Ango Sakaguchi’s expression tensed at the red light that represented the risk level. The Special Division had already taken every measure available. There was nothing left they could do, but they couldn’t just sit back and watch, either. Ango was sweating bullets from fretting and praying. He slammed his fist against the desk and asked, “Where is A5158?”

Before the operator could even answer, a voice yelled over the radio: “*Calm down, ya damn pansy!*”

“...!”



“It’s startin’ to feel nice and warm out here.”

Code name A5158—Chuuya Nakahara, the man who had just yelled at Ango over the radio, smiled with evident satisfaction.

Hovering in the sky over the fog and clouds of Yokohama was the Swan, the aircraft used by the Special Division for Unusual Powers for

sensitive operations. Its rotary wings kicked up wind as they roared. The room shook, and the hatch slowly opened. The round moon came into Chuuya's sight along with the chilly nighttime air. The moon was especially beautiful as it hung in the cloudless sky.

Its brilliant shine illuminated the fog-covered Yokohama and the colossal dragon that looked like it could consume the city in the blink of an eye. It was like something out of a dream, and yet, both the fog and the dragon were real, and there was no denying that both brought destruction.

"*Chuuya*," came Ango's subdued voice over the radio while Chuuya squinted and looked down at Yokohama. "*Dazai has most likely been disposed of by now. Do you understand what I'm getting at?*"

Chuuya removed his gloves and replied, "I don't care."

"*Are you sure?*" asked Ango. "*You won't be able to accept your reward. You won't be able to take my life if—*"

"Don't get cocky," jeered Chuuya, cutting Ango off. Nobody could see Chuuya's expression as he prepared to jump from the aircraft over Yokohama. Only his calm voice reached Ango. "You were a nobody six years ago—a low-level undercover agent," continued Chuuya as if he understood it all. "Not a single soul lent you an ear even when you opposed getting Shibusawa involved. Am I wrong?"

"..." Ango fell silent.

"I'm probably just talkin' outta my ass here, but..." Chuuya muttered, almost to himself, "I'm willin' to bet that idiot Dazai's in there."

He was watching the dragon wreaking havoc on Yokohama, and his gut was telling him that Dazai was inside the creature.

"And I'm not gonna be satisfied until I punch him in his stupid face," he declared before briefly adding "Later" and promptly hanging up.

"...*I'm counting on you.*"

Ango reflected on the fact that he was powerless, and all he had was the bitter grief in his heart. He didn't know whether his words—his prayer—reached Chuuya.

Regardless, Chuuya had made this choice for himself and was now standing at the rear hatch of the Swan, gazing down at the world below.

"We'll be reaching the destination shortly," came a voice.

He glanced in the direction it came from and saw a suited woman with almond-shaped eyes and her long hair in a bun. Chuuya looked at her and briefly pondered something before raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, I remember you. You're—"

"Tsuji-mura." She introduced herself and stared hard at Chuuya. "...Are you sure you want to do this?"

“Yeah.”

“There’s no point!” Tsujimura shot him a piercing glare. “It’s hell down there!”

In her mind, the dragon below was clearly a monster that exceeded human comprehension. Fighting it would be no different from suicide.

“There’s no way you can defeat that thing. Skill users are still human. Your overconfidence is going to get you killed,” she declared. But Chuuya merely snorted.

“That still doesn’t mean it’s okay to chicken out and run away,” he replied bluntly before taking an audible step forward. “Know when it’s okay to chicken out and run away?”

Chuuya’s overcoat flapped wildly in the wind. Puzzled by what he meant by his question, Tsujimura shook her head. “No. When?”

“Never.”

“...!”

Chuuya ridded her of her bewilderment and sprinted forward assuredly. He then jumped off the hatch and into the sky, fully confident in the path he had chosen. The wind pressure pushed against his body, and the rush of air sliced at his skin. The next moment, he felt the dragon haunting Yokohama lock eyes with him.

“O grantors of dark disgrace, do not wake me again!” Chuuya quietly muttered.

The marks of Chuuya’s skill began to crawl up his arms and emit a glow that grew brighter until his entire body was covered. He was filled with immense power. The corruption had begun. Not even Chuuya himself could stop it now.

By manipulating gravity, he pushed the fog away so he wouldn’t touch it before landing on a building’s rooftop, which he simultaneously destroyed. Concrete cracked under his feet, sending gravel flying into the air. He then dashed up the slabs of broken concrete toward the dragon.



“Wow...,” Tsujimura couldn’t help but mutter as she watched Chuuya from the airship. “He’s getting higher and higher.”

Ango came in through the radio while monitoring the satellite imagery and measuring apparatuses. “*His skill is gravity manipulation.*”

Chuuya Nakahara’s skill, *Upon the Tainted Sorrow*, was extremely powerful.

“*However...*,” continued Ango in a grave tone, “*in this state of corruption, having turned himself into gravitons, he can no longer control*

nor disable the skill."

"Are you saying he's just going to rampage until he dies?!" Tsujimura turned pale.

"*Only Dazai's nullification skill can stop it,*" Ango quietly confessed. "*Without that, Chuuya is already...*"

"No...!"

Neither Ango nor Tsujimura said anything after that. All they could do was watch over Chuuya as he dispersed the fog with incredible force.



Tsujimura, Ango, and the rest of the Special Division saw Chuuya hop from one floating slab of concrete to another, heading toward the dragon. But the dragon eventually sensed Chuuya's presence and launched dozens of light beams from its tail. Each trail of light took the form of a dragon before attacking and restraining Chuuya. Chuuya, however, immediately tore through the dragons and broke free from its cage. He then created a massive graviton bullet with his right hand and launched it directly at the dragon's nose. In that same moment, the creature opened its mouth and shot a beam of light at Chuuya.

Their attacks clashed. The explosion buried the sky in light and sent Chuuya flying backward. He was shot straight down without even a moment to manipulate gravity before slamming into the ground. The stone pavement shattered wildly, burying Chuuya underneath rubble. He couldn't move.

The dragon closed its mouth, and the light began to dim. The battle appeared to be over in a matter of seconds. But at the very next moment...

Chuuya rose from the fog with something massive in his hands—a building.

An entire *building* was defying gravity and floating in the air. Chuuya lifted the structure, which was over three stories tall, and hurled it at the dragon.

One hit. Two hits.

Chuuya roared like a beast as he slammed the building into his foe. It was hard to imagine someone so small fighting a battle of this scale. After taking a few blows from the enormous building, the dragon opened his mouth once more to unleash another beam of light.

Three hits.

Chuuya forcibly crammed the entire building inside the dragon's mouth. The ground quaked as the building crushed the dragon, which

then destroyed the building. The extremely high concentration of energy—the dragon—clashed with the structure's enormous mass, distorting the space around it. The energy ball shining in the back of the dragon's throat had lost its only exit point and exploded inside its body. Chuuya then used this opening to raise his fist into the air and pelt the dragon with countless graviton bullets, harnessing every last bit of strength he had.

“Dazai!”

His scream shook the air as another bullet pierced the dragon. The creature writhed, and its entire body lit up as if it couldn't take any more.

There was a flash of light.

The dragon suddenly disappeared, leaving only a crimson glow in its wake. The fog was blown away, disintegrated by scorching flames, and the glowing light enveloped Skull Fortress. The dark, looming tower broke into pieces that slowly began to crumble under the silent, blinding light until it was no more.

Meanwhile, at the center of that light, Chuuya was closing in on Dazai's floating corpse. As blood trickled down his body, Chuuya clenched his fist and punched Dazai right across the cheek. The violent blow forced the knife out of Dazai's back, and Chuuya heard something burst—as if the pill in Dazai's mouth had been crushed from the impact.

The capsule with its venomous-red-and-pure-white coloring broke open in Dazai's mouth, releasing the medicinal solution inside. The viscous liquid slid down Dazai's throat until eventually, long, slender fingers touched Chuuya's ghastly, corrupted face. When they made contact, it instantly nullified his skill.

“...Did you use Corruption because you believed in me? You're gonna make me cry...,” came a calm voice. It was the voice of a man who was supposed to be dead.

Without even showing a hint of surprise, Chuuya responded, “Yeah, I trusted you were too damn crafty and far too stubborn to just die.”

The corruption in Chuuya's body had already disappeared. Dazai had nullified it. He placed a hand on Chuuya's cheek where it had been punched and smirked slightly. “So this is how you wake Snow White? Kinda violent, don't you think?”

“Hey, you're the one who hid that antidote in yer mouth knowin' you were gonna get punched in the face,” griped Chuuya, making his disgust no secret.

Everything had gone according to Dazai's plan.

Fyodor pretending to work with him while secretly conspiring

with Shibusawa; their plot to poison Dazai; the Special Division for Unusual Powers dispatching Chuuya; and finally, Chuuya punching Dazai's dead body—it was all as Dazai had anticipated.

The light—a remnant of the dragon—slowly faded, and the countless pieces, small and large, that made Skull Fortress collapsed. Dazai dropped into the wreckage, followed by Chuuya, who landed right on top of him. Chuuya scowled. He desperately tried to get up, but he could hardly move a muscle.

“Get off me,” he demanded, but Dazai kept him still.

“Don't move.”

“The hell?”

Chuuya grimaced as Dazai held his head down. While glancing around, Dazai admitted, “Looks like the fog hasn't completely cleared yet, and I'd rather not have to protect you from your skill right now.”

Chuuya's eyebrow twitched. “It's still not over...?”

“...It's probably just getting started,” replied Dazai with a serious expression.

“Damn it...,” groaned Chuuya in frustration as he tried to sit up. But he couldn't manage to do that much, especially with Dazai holding him down. “I can't even...move my fingers...”

His every last drop of energy sapped, Chuuya immediately fainted. Dazai glanced at him, then turned his gaze at the wreckage of Skull Fortress. The tip of the crumbling tower still remained as it stood tall among the ruins. Dazai stared at the fortress as if he were focusing on someone inside, then mumbled:

“This much I expected, but the rest...is in their hands.”

The tip of the tower began to shine with a suspicious light.

The night was still young, and the party had only begun.

The dragon quietly changed form.



“You act as though you know everything, yet you actually know nothing.”

A serene voice echoed within the partially destroyed hall. Standing in the center of the room, which was once the highest floor of Skull Fortress, was Fyodor. He was still holding Tatsuhiko Shibusawa’s skull, unfazed by neither the dragon nor the destruction. He gently let go of the skull, but it continued to float in the air. Fyodor smiled as he appeared to talk to the hovering cranium.

“There’s no stopping the fog now,” he whispered. “The earth will become a fruit of death—a dead apple...”

He then implanted a crystal fragment into the skull’s forehead. A red light flickered. It was but a modest gift from him—a fragment of the crystal that summoned skills together. Fyodor had taken the crystal he’d offered Dazai and secretly hidden a piece of it.

“And with this, you will become a singularity,” he boasted.

A singularity occurred when multiple skills interacted to produce a new result. Nobody exactly knew what skills could be combined to create a singularity, much less what effect said singularity would have. And yet, Fyodor intentionally created one and continued to steer the situation in his favor.

The skull shook as it began to absorb the remnants of the dragon Chuuya had destroyed.

The singularity began.

Venomous red bands born from the skull twisted space and time until the skull was given a new flesh-and-blood body. Fyodor watched it shine as the red bands curled around it, creating a single form. Pale fingers slowly took shape, and long white hair fluttered in the wind.



Atsushi was still standing in the room frozen in time while Chuuya was defeating the dragon and Fyodor was creating the singularity. On the other side of the door that had appeared amid the fog was a memory of what happened six years ago. It was the room where Atsushi had sinned. The victim, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, suddenly declared:

“I remember everything now.”

Shibusawa clearly recalled the events from six years ago.

Fyodor had enticed him to go to the orphanage where he tortured a young Atsushi...until Atsushi fought back and killed him. Everything made sense to him now. Shibusawa had always been searching for something. He had been searching for the missing piece—the memories he lost six years prior.

He'd believed that Dazai's skill was the key to solving the mystery, and he knew if he released such a grandiose amount of fog within Yokohama, he would be able to catch him. Just as he expected, Dazai approached him, pretending to be on his side so he could get rid of the fog. Shibusawa saw right through Dazai's scheme, but he welcomed him with open arms and feigned ignorance, then waited for his chance to strike. Dazai danced in the palm of his hand, just as he expected. Little did Dazai know that Fyodor was actually working with Shibusawa, and he let his guard down. That was the moment Shibusawa had been waiting for.

And so Shibusawa killed him.

But he was mistaken.

Dazai's skill wasn't what Shibusawa was after. The key to filling in the gaps in his memories was not Dazai's but Atsushi's skill. And most importantly...

"What I was really after all this time was not skills, but the spark of life that resists one's own skill and prevails over one's own fate... Like the spark you showed me."

A spark with a thirst for life. That was what Shibusawa had been searching for, and nothing brought him greater joy than experiencing that spark. Even six years ago, he tested countless hypotheses in pursuit of it.

Shibusawa was overcome with bliss. It was his first taste of happiness. And now, the owner of the spark had appeared once again before him. Atsushi was the only one who could grant him light.

Shibusawa fixed his fiery gaze on Atsushi. He wanted to experience that joy once more, and he made his desire clear.

"Your soul demonstrated that will to live when you killed me... So show me your soul—your spark!"

Shibusawa's pale fingers crumbled away, and his white hair began to vanish.



As Shibusawa slowly disappeared from the room of memories past, his body simultaneously took shape around his skull in Draconia. The red bands of light formed into his flesh like a lizard regenerating its tail. A

new dragon was born from the singularity using the skull and red crystal as its vessel. The young man's white overcoat cloaked his smooth, pale skin, and his long, white hair fluttered in the wind. He could only be described as beautiful if not for the large claw-shaped scars marring his visage. On his forehead was a red crystal reminiscent of a dragon's horn. His crimson eyes creased with a vacant, sadistic smile. Tatsuhiko Shibusawa had been reborn as a skill-like life-form—a divine being that wielded the power of the dragon.

But his wish was still the same. He wanted to drive Atsushi into a corner so he could experience that spark once more. He wanted Atsushi to experience even more pain and torture than he did six years ago. This was a natural conclusion for Shibusawa to reach, for he believed that life was at its strongest and most beautiful when it was being pushed over the edge. Therefore, he was going to muster every bit of strength he possessed. He was going to cover the world in the red fog he had newly acquired.

The red fog began swallowing the earth.

“ ... ”

Nobody would ever see the smile on Fyodor's face.

Undeclared
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

Super
Deduction

The
Matchless
Poet

Demon
Snow

Rashomon

CHAPTER VI

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

All
Men
Are
Equal

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

6—1

The highway connecting Kanagawa Prefecture and Tokyo was closed off, but there was a car parked on the prefectural border. It almost seemed to be watching over Kanagawa. That car belonged to the Special Division's surveillance group. It was impossible to see what was happening over in Kanagawa due to the white mist covering the prefecture. As they carefully watched the fog from a distance, it suddenly turned red.

Furthermore, the fog, which had remained stagnant as if kept in place by a thin film, slowly began to waver. However, by the time one of the agents noticed, it was already rapidly approaching. The agent immediately slammed on the gas pedal, but it was too late. The moment the fog swallowed the car, it stopped accelerating before sliding to a full stop. The passengers once inside had vanished.

After the red fog devoured the earth, the planet would undoubtedly look like a floating red apple from space. There would be no humans left on its surface, nor any signs they ever existed. It would be a true paradise, and with that, the Dead Apple would finally be complete. A dead planet covered in red fog—that was what Fyodor had planned and sought out. Nothing other than death could wash away the original sin of man, so it was only fitting for the sin, which started with a fruit, to end with one as well. Perhaps nobody other than Fyodor ever realized that the knife in the red apple was alluding to this moment.

The red fog gradually grew more powerful to devour every single soul.



“The fog has begun spreading!”

An operator's voice yelled in the Special Division's operations room. The measuring gauges creaked. Each worker pleaded for an explanation of what was going on.

“The singularity’s variance is immeasurable!”

“If the fog continues to spread at its current speed of twelve and a half miles per hour, the entire Kanto region will be engulfed in approximately one hour and thirty-five minutes—twelve hours and thirty-six minutes for all of Japan, and a hundred and sixty-eight hours for the whole planet!”

Murakoso, an agent with long, wavy hair, frowned while blowing a bubble with her red gum until it popped. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

A shrill sound stood out among the various noises.

“Hmm...?” Aoki, who noticed the sound, opened his eyes wide. “We’re receiving a call from England’s secret military agency.”

Ango leaned forward in his chair. “...! The Order of the Clock Tower?”

He immediately connected to the call. SOUND ONLY appeared on the LCD screen when an alluring voice greeted them:

“How do you do?”

Everyone in the Special Division stiffened as if they had been struck by lightning, then swallowed their collective breath.

It was Dame Agatha Christie—an enticing woman who could charm someone with only her voice.

Even though she was speaking through a machine, her overwhelming air of authority was palpable.

“On behalf of the European nations, allow me to express my sympathies for the crisis your nation finds itself in.” Her voice was brimming with refinement and deceit as she continued, *“Therefore...”*

This was a farewell call.

“...I have dispatched a skill user to incinerate the fog before it spreads to other parts of the world.”

“Incinerate...?!” Ango’s throat had turned painfully dry. “What’s their ETA?”

“Exactly thirty minutes from now, at daybreak...”, she replied with her clear and beautiful voice, then promptly hung up. Her call was not a proposal but a declaration.

In fact, several British bomber planes were already en route to Japan as well. The European nations were planning on disposing of Tatsuhiro Shibusawa and sinking Japan along with him.

Thirty minutes. There are only thirty minutes left. If we don’t do something about the red fog before then...

“...Yokohama will be burned to the ground.”

Ango’s dazed comment was lost in the operations room. Nobody could utter another word. Only the crude noises of various machinery remained.

The wind howled. Dust danced in the air as the red fog whirled about. Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, now with a red crystal shining on his forehead, grinned with ecstasy as he stood among the ruins of Skull Fortress. Broken shards of glass glimmered in the moonlight. A shadowy figure casually approached him.

“Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, correct?”

The man with the sharp, cold voice was Akutagawa, but without even waiting for an answer, he promptly summoned Rashomon.

“Tenma Tengai!”

Black fabric instantly expanded, wrapping around Akutagawa’s limbs before covering his entire body. In this form, he was using Rashomon’s blades not as a weapon but instead as armor. This was his strongest form, but he could only maintain it for a short amount of time.

“Oh?” Shibusawa’s eyes sparkled with intrigue. “So you two are skill users as well... I thought everyone would be dead by now.”

“You two?”

Bewildered, Akutagawa looked around until he found Kyouka standing right behind him. He slightly knit his brow. “What are you doing here?”

Undeterred, Kyouka indifferently replied, “I just want him to live in the light.”

It wasn’t lip service. Her words were genuine as she faced Shibusawa with determination.

“I’ll take care of him...” Her eyes locked on Shibusawa as she cried, “Demon Snow!”

Her skill materialized, and its sword sliced through the air, creating a huge impact in the space.

Akutagawa and Kyouka. Rashomon and Demon Snow.

Shibusawa looked at their skills and made his excitement no surprise. “Amazing... Never did I dream that anyone—two people at that—would take their skill back!”

Kyouka glared at Shibusawa as he smiled like an innocent child.

“It’s not just the two of us,” she said, to which Shibusawa narrowed his eyes.

After all, she knew that the skill users of Yokohama wouldn’t go down so easily.



Amid the confines of the mist, the leader of the Port Mafia, Ougai Mori, muttered to no one in particular, "It's finally come to this..." He gazed at the red fog covering the sky. "What do you plan on doing, Dazai?"

However, he didn't seem all that concerned. It was as if the situation were but an afterthought.

"At any rate, I suppose I should be more worried about myself right now." Ougai heaved a sigh while taking out a handful of scalpels. An adorable little girl on the other side of the fog leaped out at him.

"Guh... Elise!" Ougai winced.

"I love you, Rintarou!"

Elise wasted no time in kicking Ougai to the ground. On her forehead glowed a red crystal.

Ougai tumbled before coming to a stop. "Even the fake you is adorable, Elise! I can't bring myself to hurt you." While it may have sounded like sarcasm to an outsider, Ougai was entirely serious. He watched a giant syringe materialize in the girl's arms. "Now," he started. "The optimal solution would be—"

He suddenly heard metal hitting metal. It was the sound of two swords clashing. Ougai knew this rhythm. Having a good idea who the sword's wielder was, he looked over to find the president of the Armed Detective Agency fighting his own skill nearby. The two Yukichi Fukuzawas were facing each other with swords in hand.

Their gruesome swordfight was reminiscent of a dance, and Ougai's eyes could hardly keep up with their speed. Through labored breaths, Fukuzawa said, "A swordsman with the same skill set as myself... Normally, I would be honored to have such a sparring partner, but..."

"I possess an even more perfect spirit," Fukuzawa's skill claimed softly. "While your talents may be unmatched, your swordsmanship is too sincere. You cannot defeat me with a sword that knows no guile."

"...!"

Fukuzawa narrowed his eyes and scowled as his own skill brazenly lectured him. Ougai suddenly called out to him, and Fukuzawa glanced in his direction.

"What a coincidence, Doctor Mori."

"Having a little trouble there, Mr. Fukuzawa?" As Ougai approached, it was apparent from his expression that he had a plan. Fukuzawa noticed and immediately knew what he was getting at.

"I believe I just figured out how to solve it," Fukuzawa replied.

“Excellent. Our typical actions are most effective at times like these, are they not?”

With their backs to each other, they shared their intentions without ever voicing them. They knew what the other wanted.

As Elise charged toward Ougai with her giant syringe, Fukuzawa's skill readied its sword. Immediately, Fukuzawa and Ougai traded places. Fukuzawa sliced through the crystal on Elise's forehead while Ougai threw a scalpel as a distraction before pulling out a pistol and shooting the gem on Fukuzawa's skill. Fukuzawa had no problem attacking Elise, and Ougai had no problem with being cunning. They had switched enemies to better suit their compatibilities.

“So those scalpels aren't your only weapons...” Fukuzawa turned his back to Ougai. “I'll have to be more careful from now on.”

Ougai cynically smirked at Fukuzawa, who began to walk away. “You showed no mercy, even to a cute little girl. The lone swordsman Silver Wolf is one wicked man.”

“That was nothing more than a monster,” promptly replied Fukuzawa. By the time he finished his sentence, an adorable young girl appeared before Ougai.

“What do you think you're doing leaving me behind, Rintarou?!”

There was no red crystal on the pouting little girl's forehead anymore.

“Ah, Elise... The one and true Elise.” Ougai pathetically grinned from ear to ear.

“A monster either way if you ask me,” said Fukuzawa as he disappeared into the distance. It was evident that both of them had regained their skills after destroying the crystals.

While the battles throughout Yokohama continued, Akutagawa and Kyouka faced off against Shibusawa, who now possessed the power of the dragon. The three of them were in the ruins of what once was the Yokohama Settlement. Akutagawa, armored in Rashomon's fabric, sprinted forward with incredible agility. The speed and power of Rashomon powerfully propelled his fist, and yet, Shibusawa didn't even flinch. Akutagawa's punch went straight through his body, for it wasn't a physical body.

"...?!"

Akutagawa opened his eyes wide, feeling as if he had punched through an illusion. Shibusawa smugly cackled, then said, "I have already passed through the gates of death... How do you plan on killing someone who is already dead?"

He then finished his sentence with a vigorous kick to Akutagawa's stomach, sending him flying back. Akutagawa couldn't even touch him, and yet Shibusawa's attack connected. It didn't make any sense.

Akutagawa used Rashomon to regain his footing. "You abomination..."

But glaring at Shibusawa wouldn't do anything, either. Demon Snow lowered her stance and soared toward the enemy with her katana in hand. Shibusawa's burning eyes gleamed as he ran at Demon Snow. They clashed. The white blade grazed the air before snapping in half in Shibusawa's hand.

Neither in power nor in ability were they a match for him, but Akutagawa and Kyouka didn't have the luxury of giving up.

In a daze, Atsushi stood in the prison cell-like stone room.

“Your soul demonstrated that will to live when you killed me... So show me your soul—your spark!” Shibusawa had loudly demanded before disappearing from the room of memories. Atsushi was the only one left.

“Spark of life...?” Atsushi softly uttered to himself. “What does that even mean? I don’t have any spark. I was actually kind of relieved when the fog took my tiger powers from me, because that meant I couldn’t hurt anyone anymore. I thought that proved that the tiger and I were separate entities all along...”

However...

Atsushi saw evidence of what happened six years ago: how he killed Shibusawa and how he survived after almost being killed himself. The tiger’s savage claws were frightening. There was no mistaking that.

“But...,” quietly uttered Atsushi. “The tiger saved me that day...”

The room suddenly vanished before his eyes, and a path appeared in its place. The path was shrouded in darkness, making it impossible to see what waited ahead.

Even so...

Atsushi bit his lip and took the first step forward. He figured it was better to walk into the darkness than not move at all. He heard the tiger’s roar coming from somewhere, but for some reason, he seemed to accept it.

“No matter how far I walk or run, the tiger will still follow me...”

Did it all begin when Atsushi opened the white door? Or had this been going on long before that? Even after Atsushi lost his skill, the tiger still chased after him. Even after he destroyed the red crystal on the tiger’s forehead, it still felt like he was by Atsushi’s side whether he liked it or not.

Atsushi used to be afraid that the tiger was inside of him. It terrified him.

But..., he thought, *is the tiger nothing more than something for me to fear?*

...No. I think—I’m sure that’s not all it is. Because whether it brings me fear or courage, the tiger is part of me.

“It’s just like how I can’t run away from my own heartbeat... because you’re my strength to keep living.” Atsushi lifted his chin and

peered into the darkness. The howling of the tiger grew nearer. "I can hear you clearly now. I understand what you want to say."

After he addressed the tiger inside of him, Atsushi began to run. It was as if the beast was telling him to pick up the pace.

Atsushi's eyes lit up. "I know! Everyone's fighting for their lives!"

He was no longer going to be afraid of his past and be at the mercy of merely a small part of himself.

"So I'll say the same to you: Hurry up if you don't want to get left behind," Atsushi ordered. He then called out its name—the part of himself he had finally come to accept:

"Let's go, Byakko!"

The tiger leaped toward Atsushi's extended hand as it howled beneath the white moonlight.

“...!”

Shibusawa slammed Akutagawa into the ground. The intense impact caused the black fabric armor to emit a pale light before disappearing. His demonic armor, Tenma Tengai, had reached its limit. Rashomon reverted to a black overcoat and covered Akutagawa's collapsed body. Shibusawa immediately tried to pierce his heart until Demon Snow intervened with its sword. Nevertheless, he seemed to have anticipated the attack as he calmly deflected the blade, then used the momentum to swiftly kick Akutagawa. The powerful blow sent Akutagawa flying back into the rubble. Rashomon, having used up the last bit of its strength, was hardly able to protect him. Akutagawa crashed into a block of concrete, sending a cloud of dust into the air. His entire body was in agony. Bruises, broken bones, organ damage—different types of pain mixed together, and he found himself unable to even breathe.

Demon Snow tried to strike while Shibusawa still had his leg in the air from the kick, but it too suffered the same fate. Shibusawa simply pretended to have his guard down so he could lure it over. He blocked the skill's incoming blade with his arm, then threw a punch at blinding speed, knocking Demon Snow away from Akutagawa. The skill uncontrollably flew back until it crashed into one of the few remaining buildings, which then came crumbling down, burying it alive. The only one left was Kyouka.

“I've gladly accepted the sparks of your lives.”

Kyouka braced herself as Shibusawa approached her to strike.

“Now you will spend the rest of your days as parts of my collection...”

“...!”

Shibusawa's fingernails then grew into claws. But right when he was about to hit Kyouka and deliver the final blow...

A pale light suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Shibusawa reacted to the unannounced presence, but before he could even brace himself, a trail of light rammed into him with a thunderous roar. The shock wave gouged the earth and kicked up an explosive gale.

Kyouka promptly closed her eyes. After the dust finally settled, she opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was the silhouette of a nimble, muscular white beast. Kyouka was speechless.

Why? she wondered. After enduring the first hit, Shibusawa created some distance between them. His lips curled into a sneer.

“The dragon and the tiger... I see now why they are called rivals,” he said, seeming to be strangely enjoying this. “The Russian man who told me about you said that the dragon is the true form of the chaos that all skills possess. Which means...” Shibusawa scrutinized the beast. “...You, the white tiger, are the one who resists all skills.”

The beast’s silhouette glowed blue as it took the form of a human. Akutagawa sat up out of the rubble and weakly clicked his tongue. “About time, Man-Tiger.”

Kyouka, however, appeared to be regarding Atsushi in a somewhat sorrowful manner. Shibusawa, Akutagawa, Kyouka—while each of their expressions were different, they were all watching the same person. Atsushi only looked at Shibusawa after transforming into a half-tiger, half-man. The scars on his body were already healing thanks to his tiger skill. He got into position with his claws.

“Here to kill me again, Atsushi Nakashima?” asked Shibusawa.

Kyouka jumped when she heard the word *again*, and Akutagawa narrowed his eyes a little. But Atsushi didn’t even blink. He had been ready to pay for his sins.

“I’m just sending something back to where it belongs,” he replied.

Atsushi instantly leaped toward Shibusawa with unbelievable speed and threw the first punch.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though,” murmured Shibusawa. “I’m not blaming you for what happened.”

The power of the tiger connected with Shibusawa’s stomach through Atsushi’s fist, sending the man flying. Shibusawa’s body carved a groove in the ground as his body slid through the dirt. He didn’t even have time to fade out his physical body to avoid the attack like he did with Akutagawa.

“Yes. This—*this* is what I wanted,” revealed Shibusawa in delight as he rose to his feet. Atsushi, however, never expected he was going to defeat him in one hit, so he was already closing the distance for his next strike. Shibusawa prepared to counter and grinned as if to say he’d hardly felt a thing.

“I knew you were special!” he yelled.

Their arms crossed, and there was a loud thud. Atsushi’s fist buried itself in Shibusawa’s face.

“Ha-ha-ha! Boredom is foreign to me now!” guffawed Shibusawa as he grabbed onto Atsushi’s extended arm. “I finally understand the meaning of life!”

“...!”

Right as Atsushi was about to deflect Shibusawa's fist, Shibusawa kned him in the stomach and sent a dull pain through his body as he was tossed backward. Atsushi's body hollowed the ground, and a cloud of dust rose into the air.

Akutagawa ground his teeth in irritation. “Rashomon!”

He stood, glaring at Shibusawa. His overcoat wriggled, and the black strips of fabric grew a jaw like a hellhound, which immediately pounced at Shibusawa.

“You're wasting your time!” Shibusawa said with a laugh.

He grabbed the incoming strips of black fabric with both hands, then vigorously pulled them forward.

“...?!”

Akutagawa's eyes flew open, but it was already too late. He couldn't escape, and Shibusawa wasn't going to let go of Rashomon. Akutagawa tried to attack by extending the black strips of fabric Shibusawa was holding, but Shibusawa deflected each blow, then brandished the fabric like two whips, spinning Akutagawa in the air. Rashomon was overpowered.

“You are weak,” jeered Shibusawa before swinging his arms down, slamming Akutagawa into the ground.

“Demon Snow!” yelled Kyouka as her skill swung its sword, but Shibusawa promptly deflected the blade.

“Doing the same thing over and over again will get you nowhere,” he coldly stated.

Dink!

A rigid sound echoed. Shibusawa blocked the blade with his arm. Demon Snow immediately pulled her blade back, then relentlessly swung it multiple times. Each slash was soon followed by the sound of wind brushing off the blade. However, her blade never reached Shibusawa.

“See?” he said with a cruel smirk. Shibusawa raised his sharp, elongated claws, but his target wasn't Demon Snow. It was Kyouka.

As she tensed up, Demon Snow rushed in front of her to protect her. The claws tore right through Demon Snow, and the impact shot Kyouka into the distance.

“Demon Snow!” cried Kyouka in a pained voice. Her skill then disappeared as if it had faded out of existence.

“No...!” As Kyouka soared through the air, her eyes went wide with anguish until her back slammed against the ruins of an old building.

“...!”

Kyouka braced herself for the impact, but no matter how long she waited, she didn't feel any pain. Instead, she felt someone's arms

gently wrap around her. They were Atsushi's. Shibusawa had kicked him to the ground, but he immediately noticed that Kyouka was in danger and rushed back to save her.

I'm so glad I made it in time.

Atsushi deeply exhaled with Kyouka in his arms. He wasn't fast enough to prevent Shibusawa from attacking, but at the very least, he was able to catch her before she actually crashed into the ruins. The damaged building behind them crumbled. Atsushi stared fixedly at Shibusawa and racked his brain. Shibusawa was strong. He literally possessed inhuman powers. Neither Atsushi, nor Akutagawa, nor Kyouka could defeat him. So what could they do?

"...We won't be able to protect our home unless the three of us work together," muttered Atsushi, filled with determination.

"...!"

Atsushi met Kyouka's astonished gaze and asked, "You can summon Demon Snow again, right?"

"..." Her eyes trembled with fear.

"Kyouka. Man-Tiger," Akutagawa called out. He staggered back to his feet, then looked fixedly at them. "You know...what you need to do...right?"

Atsushi nodded. "Yeah, I do," he decisively responded before facing Shibusawa once more.

"Kyouka." He stood with his back to Kyouka, the one who had been leading him all this time. Facing Shibusawa, he confidently whispered, "You never wanted to hate Demon Snow. She will listen to you. I promise."

Kyouka snapped up her head in astonishment, and Atsushi could sense how she was feeling even without looking back. He began to run. He roared as he threw his claws at Shibusawa.

Shibusawa narrowed his crimson eyes. "That naïveté of yours is a sight to behold."

They collided.

Atsushi and Shibusawa were battling once more. Sometimes, they threw and dodged punches. At other times, they focused on defending while waiting for an opening. They went back and forth, vying for the upper hand, so it wasn't going to be easy for Akutagawa or Kyouka to help. Nevertheless, Atsushi was still at a great disadvantage. In fact, Shibusawa was starting to dodge each of Atsushi's strikes while landing every one of his own. Atsushi braced his legs so he wouldn't get knocked back like earlier, but he was struggling. Kyouka could see that, and she tightly clenched her fist. Inside her hand was the old cell phone.

"Demon Snow!!" she cried.

Right as Shibusawa was about to pummel Atsushi, Demon Snow suddenly descended upon him from behind. Flower petals scattered in the fog, and a beautiful kimono fluttered in the wind. Shibusawa didn't even have enough time to look back before Demon Sword's sword pierced his chest.

"...!" The blade skewered him to the ground.

Without wasting a single moment, Atsushi yelled, "Akutagawa!"

"Don't try to order me around!" barked Akutagawa as his overcoat quivered. Dozens of black blades emerged from his back, then began boring holes into the ground as they crawled toward Shibusawa. The torrent of black blades surrounded the Collector to form a cage. But before the cage finished trapping Shibusawa inside, Atsushi rushed over and slipped in with him.

"You've got nowhere to run now," he assured Shibusawa. Atsushi raised his claws into the air and impaled him. "Haaaaaa!"

The cage shook with intense fury. Atsushi's punch sent Shibusawa flying back. Atsushi swung his fists and dug his claws into him over and over again. Shibusawa's bones snapped and blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

But even though he was writhing in pain, he laughed. "This... This is what I have been waiting for."

Shibusawa sprinted up to Atsushi and kicked him in the chin.

"...!"

Atsushi's brain rattled, and the world around him began to spin.

"This elation that death brings me...", Shibusawa said to the staggering tiger, "...can you feel it, too?!"

The horn-like crystal on his forehead brilliantly shone until a red light suddenly shot out like a laser and tore through Rashomon's cage. The vivid light disintegrated the jet-black blades and drenched the world in red. The blast wave was so powerful that it even reached Akutagawa and Kyouka outside the cage, forcing them to grab onto the ground so they didn't get blown away.

Before anyone had even realized it, Shibusawa had gathered the red fog around them and enclosed Atsushi and himself in a red sphere of light...as if he were telling Atsushi that he wouldn't let *him* run away any longer.

"Show me once more the spark that resists each and every skill!"

The crystal on Shibusawa's forehead glowed red once more.

A powerful, blinding red light.

Atsushi's body slowly transformed as he bathed in its radiance. The powerful spring in his step vanished, and his muscular arms covered in white fur returned to normal while his claws simply vanished. The power of the tiger gradually faded, and a pale skill crystal emerged from Atsushi's chest.

“Come! Show me that skill once more!” Shibusawa reached for the crystal.

He’s gonna steal my skill.

This was just like what happened six years ago. Atsushi was overcome with excruciating pain, and an unbearable sense of loss gnawed at his heart.

But I won’t let him!

“It’s beautiful...,” muttered Shibusawa in admiration. “*This* is the ultimate skill!”

“The tiger isn’t a skill!” screamed Atsushi, pouring his soul into every last word. “The tiger is me!”

He desperately reached out, opposing fate with every fiber of his being, and grabbed the pale crystal.

“...!”

Atsushi felt a warmth on his palm as his power gradually returned to its rightful owner. A pale-blue light wrapped his body, and the Byakko’s power returned. His fingernails extended into claws, and his body became covered in fur. He felt himself brimming with the tiger’s power. His body had grown used to it now.

Atsushi immediately tried to crush Shibusawa’s head with both hands, but Shibusawa grabbed Atsushi’s hands with his own. Their fingers locked.

“Mn...!”

Their powers clashed. Their muscles were at their limits as their bones creaked. They pushed as hard as they could, and their arms began to faintly tremble. Atsushi glared ferociously at Shibusawa, who was practically nose to nose with him.

“...I understand everything now,” muttered Shibusawa with the same desperate expression as Atsushi. “I know why you’re here, why you appeared before me, and what *his* words truly meant.”

Their energy sent the fog swirling. Shibusawa was the only thing reflecting in Atsushi’s eyes. As if he was starting to crack open, a shadow began devouring Shibusawa whole.

“You...” Shibusawa laughed as the dark shadow continued to take over his body. “You are the angel who will save me...”

The scars on his face glowed.

“Ah...,” he moaned with evident satisfaction as his body continued to be stripped of its flesh, swallowed by the darkness. Even his beautiful features and pale skin were stripped away. Not a single strand of white hair remained. All that was left in Atsushi’s hand was a skull.

A skull with the claw marks of a tiger.

Nothing more than the bones of a man who died six years ago.

But Atsushi didn’t relax his grip. As if he wanted to erase all the

contradictions and return the past to the past, he crushed the skull...

...to make sure that something like this would never happen again.

The bones shattered, and the skull broke apart until it was ground into a fine powder. The remnants of the skull then turned into particles of light that streamed about, and a pale-blue light appeared in Atsushi's hands.

The light spread from within his hands, slowly swallowing the fog that Shibusawa created. The venomous-red fog disappeared, and the pale-blue light stretched across Yokohama just as daybreak began. It was as if the beautiful light was purifying all that it touched. By the time the red fog cleared, the darkness reigning over the sky had started fading into gray.

The long night was finally over, and the morning sun had started to rise.

Atsushi gently descended onto the surface as he watched the pale light born from his hands. After letting out a sigh of relief, he smiled at Kyouka, who looked deeply worried. Her tense expression gradually loosened. Out of the corner of his eye, Atsushi saw Akutagawa wordlessly departing the scene.





“I have confirmed the disappearance of the singularity and the fog,” came Aoki’s trembling voice from the Special Division’s operations room. After a brief moment of silence, the room erupted in cheers and laughter. Even Ango instinctively sighed in relief as his body went limp, and he dropped into his chair. The operator’s similarly relieved voice assured everyone that the Order of the Clock Tower confirmed they had aborted the mission.



Around the same time that day...

In a room filled with stately, traditional furniture was a woman perched on a couch decorated with intricate embroideries.

“How unfortunate,” she muttered after hearing the news in Yokohama, then elegantly picked up her porcelain teacup. “The smell of a burning nation goes so well with tea.” Her whispery voice was calm and collected. She lowered her somewhat distant gaze upon the surface of her amber-colored tea.



The morning sun slowly rose over the crystal-clear skies of Yokohama. People were returning to the ruins of the downtown high-rise district, the highways littered with countless cars, and the abandoned fast-food joints.

A small-framed man wearing a black overcoat wandered the remains of Skull Fortress in search of something. It was Akutagawa.

A voice suddenly called out to him from the shadows of the rubble.

“The hell are you doin’ here?”

Akutagawa turned his gaze in the direction of the crude voice to find Chuuya slumped over on the ground. He’d clearly been through a lot since Akutagawa last saw him, and his trademark hat was nowhere to be found. It must have fallen off somewhere nearby.

“Dazai’s all right. Still an idiot, but all right,” Chuuya lethargically uttered as if he could read Akutagawa’s mind.

“...”

Akutagawa abruptly straightened his back and bowed. But as he

quickly started to walk away, Chuuya added “Hey” and stopped him. “Gimme a hand, will ya?” he asked, flashing a toothy grin.



The abnormalities caused by Shibusawa’s fog gradually dissipated as the sun of a new day rose. Ranpo Edogawa leisurely strolled through the Armed Detective Agency.

“I don’t have a skill, and I’m back now, so I guess everything worked out.”

The agency office was a mess. Chairs and documents were scattered about the rooms. Perhaps the only things still in one piece were the safe and its contents. Ranpo snacked on a few sweets that were inside the safe while looking out the blinds at the sun.

“Atsushi’s really starting to get things done. Don’t you agree, Dazai?”

Snap. A snack cracked in half between his teeth. The man who would reply to Ranpo’s question was already on his way to meet up with Atsushi and Kyouka.



It’s finally over, Atsushi thought while he and Kyouka gazed at the mountain of debris once known as Skull Fortress. The darkness of the night had made it hard to tell, but the morning sun showed it clearly: The city was in a rather dreary state. Of course, it made sense, given what had happened. Nevertheless, Atsushi was inwardly relieved that the battle ended before things got even worse. He was relieved that he was able to protect someone important to him, at the very least.

All of a sudden, Atsushi heard footsteps approaching from behind. He and Kyouka immediately looked back to find Dazai wearing his sand-colored overcoat. Atsushi quietly stared at him. It felt like it’d been ages since they last met.

“Atsushi,” began Dazai with a calm expression. “About what happened, I—”

“You were trying to protect the city, right?”

Atsushi broke into a smile before Dazai could even finish his sentence. He naturally felt a warmth in his heart.

Dazai’s surprised expression turned pensive. “Do I really look like the kind of person who would risk his life to save others?”

Atsushi blinked at him quizzically because, to him, it was obvious. There was no doubting Dazai was a good person. He had no idea what Dazai even meant with his question.

So Atsushi simply nodded and replied in earnest, "Well...yes."

Dazai's eyes bulged slightly. Before long, he smiled in amazement. His grin was bitter, yet sweet.

"Whatever you say," he muttered, then ambled past Atsushi and Kyouka. He gazed into the distance. "...I really hope he was able to fill his boredom and loneliness with something in the end."

"Are you sure this is what you wanted?" Kyouka asked Atsushi with a worried gaze. Atsushi looked down at the ground. He knew what she meant. That was why he had to pick his next words carefully.

"...I could probably seal away this memory just like how I'd forgotten I'd killed him before. But..." He paused, then lifted his head. "...I'm okay with this."

His unshakable will glowed in his eyes as he put his honest thoughts into words.

"At the very least, right now I'm proud we were able to protect this city together. Because being able to live side by side with you and everyone else...is something just a bit more wonderful."

"..."

Relieved, Kyouka relaxed her worried expression into a smile. Dazai, who was watching them over his shoulder, gently smirked. It seemed like he was reminiscing about the days long gone while taking delight in Atsushi for who he was. As if their smiles were contagious, Atsushi's lips curled upward as well.

Out of nowhere, a familiar voice yelled in the distance, "Dazai, you idiot! You're still alive?!"

It was Kunikida. When the three of them looked back, the rest of the Armed Detective Agency members were walking their way. Tanizaki's head was hung low in exhaustion; Kunikida was waving his hand; Kenji seemed as cheerful as ever; Yosano had her head held high; and Fukuzawa was taking calm, quiet steps forward. Their smiling faces looked even more radiant amid the bright scenery of Yokohama.

"Everyone's okay," observed Atsushi in relief.

"Of course they are," replied Dazai. "We're the *Armed* Detective Agency, after all." He shot Atsushi a placid smile. "Right?"

Atsushi grinned from ear to ear and nodded.

"Right!"

Undeclared
by the
Rain

Beast
Beneath
the
Moonlight

Super
Deduction

The
Matchless
Poet

Demon
Snow

Rashomon

EPILOGUE

Upon
the
Tainted
Sorrow

Light
Snow

No
Longer
Human

All
Men
Are
Equal

Crime
and
Punish-
ment

Thou
Shalt
Not
Die

EPILOGUE

A few nights had gone by since the night of the red fog, and peace was finally returning to the city of Yokohama. The streets were filled with commuters, happy families, and the voices of students as they shared laughs. But for the Special Division for Unusual Powers, the incident wasn't over yet.

"I guess we should be grateful there weren't any civilian casualties," muttered Ango from his chair until he suddenly noticed something odd about his subordinate who was seated at a nearby desk. Tsujimura, the subordinate in question, was nodding off despite being on duty. Her head slammed into her LCD screen, and she shrieked as the impact woke her up. "Ngh... Ouch?!"

Ango sighed and opened the file in his hands. "Please get back to work, Tsujimura. We're only on our fourth consecutive all-nighter."

Littered across Ango's desk were bottles upon bottles of empty energy drinks and a file labeled THE DEAD APPLE REPORT lying on top of a mountain of documents.

"Oh, come on," whined Tsujimura. "There's no way we'll manage to cover up what happened... Not after all the damage that giant monster did to the city." But Ango didn't reply. So she gave up, rubbed her eyes, and resumed working.

"...Ango, sir." She glanced over at her superior. "What even happened here anyway?"

"I don't know," he replied as he looked down at the report. "The three masterminds behind this all had conflicting motives, and I still can't grasp the big picture yet. Dazai will just evade the question like he always does, and there's no way of knowing what Fyodor the Conjuror's true motivations were, either," he claimed with a matter-of-fact tone. He was being completely truthful.

"However..." Ango paused, then raised his eyes from the report. "If we ignore all the schemes and trickery involved, this may actually be a surprisingly simple case."

"...?" Tsujimura appeared confused.

"Perhaps the two of them just wanted to get a glimpse of someone like them..." Ango thought of his old friend. "A man with a mind so extraordinary that he seemed almost alien... That was Shibusawa. Perhaps they wanted to see what he would do and how he would meet

his demise...or perhaps how he would be saved.” He sounded somewhat sentimental. “The only three aliens in the world... We can’t even begin to imagine the isolation and loneliness they feel.”

He tried to bitterly laugh it off and change the subject, but when he looked back over at Tsujimura’s desk, she was nowhere in sight. She’d been earnestly listening up until a moment ago, so where could she have gone?

“Tsujimura...?”

Ano sat up from his chair, only to find Tsujimura sound asleep over her desk.



The Port Mafia leader gazed out the glass walls of his spacious, tidy office at the clear-blue sky. Chuuya stood with dignity in the room that most never even get a chance to enter.

“Were you aware of the mechanism behind the fog, boss?” he asked Ougai Mori, the Mafia’s leader.

It was a simple question to which Ougai coolly replied, “I figured Dazai would require your help getting rid of the fog if he was indeed acting alone. He needed a forerunner.”

“So I was just the opening act?”

“Dazai had the starring role.” Ougai spoke as if it were a trivial matter.

“So what’s my reward?” Chuuya asked.

A sharp light reflected in Ougai’s eyes. “The return of order to this city,” came his blunt response.

Chuuya’s smile was unrestrained. “In other words, the city’s peace, huh?”

An airplane cut through the clouds. Traveling seagulls could be seen out the window as well.

Ougai shot Chuuya a sympathetic smile. “Good work.”

“Don’t thank me, boss,” Chuuya casually replied. “I just follow your orders.”

His boots tapped gratifyingly against the floor as he departed. Only after the heavy door was closed did order finally return to the office.



An airplane cut through the clouds as Fyodor surveyed Yokohama from a nearby rooftop. Glittering high-rises and stately brick buildings stood side by side in this port city with its countless citizens who

struggled against crime and punishment.

“I think I’ve taken a liking to this city myself...”

Fyodor took a bite of the apple in his hand, and the juicy nectar ran down his delicate fingers.

“You’d all better be on your best behavior until next time.”

The enticing words slipped off his tongue, but at that moment, not a soul knew who his words would reach.



“See to it that our client is properly taken care of! Got it?”

Kunikida’s overly seriously voice resounded throughout the Armed Detective Agency office. “Who do you think you are, Kunikida? The agency’s mommy?” Dazai joked.

Kunikida easily took the bait and snapped at Dazai while continuing to type something on his keyboard. To no one’s surprise, Dazai was reading *The Complete Suicide* while teasing Kunikida just like he always did. “...Anyway, you two enjoy yourselves,” Dazai said.

“...Off you go, then,” added the president right as the two people in question got ready to head out the door.

Feeling encouraged by Fukuzawa’s words, the boy looked over to the president’s side and noticed Ranpo sitting in his chair, eating junk food and glued to some video game—no surprises there.

The boy and the girl began turning around to leave once more when they made eye contact with Tanizaki and the others. Tanizaki was smiling calmly, and Naomi was seated across from him like always. Kenji was carefully tending to his potted plant with a grin, and Yosano shot a languid glance in their direction.

“Take care,” came Naomi’s gentle voice.

Their days saw a multitude of desires intersect and numerous schemes intertwine, and that was exactly why Atsushi continued to work at the Armed Detective Agency alongside Kyouka.

Because that was the place where he belonged—and the place he wanted to protect. He took Kyouka’s hand and smiled.

“See you later!”

AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everyone. It is I, Asagiri, the person responsible for the *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga and light novels. Did you enjoy the novel adaptation of *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple*?

This story brought many firsts for the *Bungo Stray Dogs* series. It was the first *Bungo* movie, for starters, and the first story originally created for the anime. It's also the first movie novelization. And last but not least, it's the first novel not written by me, Asagiri, but Hiro Iwahata.

I love “firsts,” whether it's trying something new or working with an unfamiliar medium. Take, for example, my first movie novelization and my first drama CD script. I readily agreed to both of those projects simply because I wanted to do something I'd never done before. As an author, nothing excites me more than trying something new and stepping foot into unknown territory. (Plus, let me add that I'm about as active as an armadillo when I'm not writing, meaning I spend all day under the *kotatsu* doing nothing.)

And that's exactly why I had so much fun having this new experience with *Dead Apple*. Hiro Iwahata and I would have meetings to discuss the main outline and essence of the story, and I took great delight in the first *Bungo Stray Dogs* novel written by someone other than myself. I added a few minor things I felt necessary here and there, and just like that, you now have the resulting book in your hands. Therefore, I would like to extend my gratitude to Hiro Iwahata for taking on this difficult task and working so hard on it. It has allowed me to proudly share this full-fledged *Dead Apple* novel with the world.

Now, allow me a moment to discuss some of the particulars of *Dead Apple*. Chronologically, the story takes place after the second season of the anime—in other words, after the war with the Guild, which puts *Dead Apple* somewhere between the ninth and tenth volumes of the manga. The script itself was mainly a joint effort between the *Bungo Stray Dogs* anime team, the film's director, Igarashi, and the scenario writer, Enokido. However, I worked on a good amount of the screenplay myself, including the original proposal, plot development, and even some of the writing. (I was also the one who came up with the title *Dead Apple*.)

With the director and Enokido (plus the rest of the producers and editors), I got a hotel room so we could work day and night writing the story. After we woke up, we wrote. After we ate, we wrote. We exchanged ideas no matter what they were, and I gave a grandiose speech about what Fyodor was supposed to be like. We dined on instant *yakisoba*; we very quietly had meetings so as not to wake up whoever had passed out first... And that's how this story was made. This experience was another first for me, and I had a lot of fun doing it.

The novel also ended up affecting the main story in numerous ways, and I'm sure this new experience will continue to influence my future work as well.

That was how I felt as I constructed this tale. My only wish is that it affects you, the reader, in a similarly positive way.

Before I go, I would just like to thank everyone in the production committee who worked so hard to get this novel published. I would also like to thank my editor, Shirahama, and the illustrator Ganjii for the amazing artwork. Most of all, however, I would like to thank Hiro Iwahata for writing this novel. Thank you very much.

I hope we meet again in my next "first."

KAFKA ASAGIRI

AFTERWORD

It's a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Hiro Iwahata, and I am the author behind the novelization of *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple*. I've been a fan of both the *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga and the novels for quite some time, so I was simultaneously ecstatic and nervous when I was approached about the film's novelization. I seriously thought my editor was messing with me.

Although I wondered if I was really worthy of such an honor, I was determined to create something that longtime fans, who have loved and supported the series for many years, would enjoy. Writing this novel was an honor for which I am truly grateful from the bottom of my heart!

I even got the chance to hear all sorts of tales from Kafka Asagiri during our meetings!

The more I learned about this story's setting, the characters' thoughts and feelings, and the like, the more moved I was by how passionate and dedicated Asagiri and the production committee were to their craft. Some of my fondest memories are of listening to them discuss the story!

Therefore, I wanted to convey this feeling in the novel and include every tale I heard as well. Furthermore, I worked on this book under Asagiri's supervision, meaning there are several lines in certain scenes that differ from the movie. It might even be fun comparing the two! Nothing would make me happier than the fans enjoying this novel alongside the movie.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the following people one more time: Kafka Asagiri, Sango Harukawa, and everyone in the production committee, including Enokido, the scriptwriter; Igarashi, the director; Ganjii, the amazing illustrator; and everyone who picked up this book. Thank you all so much!

HIRO IWAHATA

Special Thanks

Original Story and Script Supervision by Kafka Asagiri

Manga Illustration by Sango Harukawa

Director: Takuya Igarashi

Script: Yoji Enokido

Character Design and Chief Animation Director: Nobuhiro Arai

Art Director: Yumiko Kondo

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